



# UNENDING FLOW

Case Study on Communications in the Gulf Oil Spill

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For more than three months in the spring and summer of 2010 the nation and world watched in helpless, frustrated amazement as millions of gallons of crude oil spilled into the Gulf of Mexico. There was no escaping the images of ugly, mud-colored crude oil exploding into the blue water under high pressure. Night and day every news outlet, from the mainstream to the newest forms of Internet social media, told the stories. Millions watched the video feeds from remotely-operated vehicles swarming the damaged wellhead a mile below the surface.

More than 60,000 people participated in responding to this disaster. A complex, often-confusing and seemingly ad-hoc organization was structured to deal with the event. This organization focused on stopping the oil, preventing it from coming ashore and damaging sensitive beaches and marshes, cleaning it up, and compensating the great many communities and individuals who had been harmed by this human-caused catastrophe. Because the event impacted five states in the Gulf region, multiple command posts and public information operations had to be set up and managed centrally by a structure known as Unified Area Command.

Several hundred of those involved in responding were focused on communicating with the millions in the nation, and around the world, about the events unfolding. This group faced a scale of event that was unprecedented as well as unprecedented media and public attention. The Deepwater Horizon oil spill (as it was officially known) exceeded the duration of previous disasters such as 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina. As a result, in addition to the seemingly unending flow of oil from a reservoir four miles below the surface of the Gulf, this event demanded an unending flow of desperately needed information. This case study provides a behind-the-scenes look at the challenges, successes and failures of public communication during this event.

This case study will focus on three major elements of the communication response:

**Internet communications** -- including the event website, social media, text distributions, and special technologies used such as live video, “Turtle Talk” webcast and chat, and widgets.

**Media coverage** – how media demands were met, how the event was portrayed, specific challenges and lessons learned.

**Communication organization and structure** – how the response was staffed, organization structure used, internal information flow, and external control.

A final section will summarize some of the key lessons learned with a focus on assisting companies and organizations more effectively prepare to respond to major events.

## Introduction

### *PIER Involvement*

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PIER (Public Information Emergency Response) System was used as the communication management platform for this response. In addition, numerous personnel from PIER including contractors and staff from parent company O'Brien's Response Management, were integral to the communication response. Some explanation is needed as to why PIER as a technology and PIER Systems as a company was positioned to support this event.

PIER was initially developed in late 1999 and 2000 in response to a three-fatality gasoline pipeline explosion. In this event, the Incident Command System was used to manage the response including a form of Joint Information Center or JIC. The Incident Command System (ICS) is a response management protocol developed by the fire services in the 1970s. It was mandated by law for use in the oil industry and federal, state and local agencies who would respond to an oil industry event. The Oil Pollution Act of 1990, following the ExxonValdez event in 1989, and the National Contingency Plan required all oil industry participants use this common protocol to work together with the government agencies under a structure known as Incident Command, or Unified Command in the case of multiple response leaders. PIER was created in this environment, was therefore uniquely suited to meet the communication needs of major oil spills and other industry events. As the US Coast Guard is typically the lead federal agency in an oil spill that touches water, the US Coast Guard was the first commercial purchaser of the PIER System. By 2003 all US Coast Guard districts and Headquarters were using the PIER System to manage daily public affairs operations as well as facilitating its use as the primary communication management system for all oil industry responses and exercises. PIER was also the system used during the annual Spill of National Significance (SONS) exercise where highly complex, geographically dispersed events have been simulated annually as part of OPA 90.

### *Initial Response*

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When the explosion occurred during the evening of April 20, 2010 on Transocean's Deepwater Horizon drilling rig, both BP and the Coast Guard were well practiced in National Incident Management System-based communication response and in the use of PIER as a sophisticated media and stakeholder management system. District 8 in New Orleans responded to the notification from the Transocean platform, dispatching their search and rescue operation. District 8 public affairs staff prepared a press release on their district's PIER site, published it and distributed it to media on the morning of April 21 as part of their standard media practice. Similarly, BP which had pre-staged a number of PIER crisis sites, was able to quickly prepare a crisis site for public launch and to begin the media and public communication process. Numerous BP and Coast Guard personnel had extensive experience in operating PIER because both organizations use PIER for routine communication management and both had a significant number of personnel involved in numerous drills and other responses where PIER was the communication system used.

## *Transitioning to ICS and Unified Command*

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Under the Incident Command System, mandated for use in oil spills since the ExxonValdez by the Oil Pollution Act of 1990, a response quickly shifts from individual response by the private parties and government agencies involved into a coordinated, collaborative response. Overall control of the response is provided by a structure known as Unified Command, consisting of the private party identified as the entity responsible for paying the bill, plus the lead federal agency, lead state agency, and lead local agency. The private company's official designation is the "Responsible Party," a term that refers to the company that is determined legally liable for the response costs and not necessarily the company who caused the event. The lead federal agency is always the Coast Guard when the spill occurs on navigable water, and the EPA when it occurs on land.

A key principle of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) is the clear authority of Unified Command over all aspects of the response, including public information. Under this structure, only Unified Command has the authority to release official information about the event and the response. The structure used by federal agencies and the oil industry to respond to events is called the Joint Information Center (JIC). This structure was developed initially by the US Coast Guard in 2000 and updated in 2009 by 16 federal agencies identified as part of the National Response Team. The focus of the JIC is to provide a single, authoritative voice for response information and to ensure compliance with NIMS/ICS requirements of Unified Command authority over all information.

After the Deepwater explosion occurred, experienced Public Information Officers from the US Coast Guard and BP quickly implemented the JIC operation and transitioned communication from the Coast Guard's District 8 site and the BP crisis site into a single JIC website. Under NIMS, Unified Command designates a specific name for the incident to avoid confusion. This incident was initially designated the "Gulf of Mexico Trans Ocean Drilling Incident" and the Joint Information Center website was launched on April 22 with that title and with the logos of all Unified Command participants including the US Coast Guard and BP. On April 26, the incident name was changed to "Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill". A web address or url was established, [www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://www.deepwaterhorizonresponse.com), and distribution of information from this site was quickly established.

## Section One: Internet Communications

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This section will focus on the deepwaterhorizonresponse.com website, bp.com, social media and the multiple interactive tools and technologies implemented by Unified Command and BP's communicators in responding to this event.

### *Section One Summary*

*The primary incident website, plus other websites maintained by major response participants received massive amounts of traffic. The various websites used as primary sources of information for the response were viewed an estimated half a billion times by well over 30 million individuals. But Internet users are not passive viewers of information. Rather they are actively engaged in conversations and interactions with those involved in the response. The primary response website, deepwaterhorizonresponse.com was designed to help manage high levels of interactivity and approximately 100,000 individuals communicated directly with the response operation through the inquiry management system and through the surveys and forms integrated into the site. In addition, a great many others interacted with the response organization and primary response participants through social media, particularly Facebook and Twitter.*

*In addition to extensive use of incident-specific websites, interactive communication management and social media, this event saw the introduction or broader use of technologies that may well become standard for major crises and emergencies in the future. This includes the extensive use of live video feeds, multiple-platform interactive presentations such as used in "Turtle Talk," and new ways of distributing information through widgets.*

*This event received an unprecedented amount of global mainstream media coverage as will be described in Section 2. However, it also clearly demonstrates that crisis and emergency communications both today and in the future will increasingly rely on Internet-based communications as a primary means of relaying information of vital interest to those impacted and the general public.*

## *Massive Public Traffic*

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From April 22 through September the Deepwater Horizon website withstood over 150 million hits including repeated visits from over five million unique visitors. At the peak of public interest, in late May through mid-June, the site sustained an average of over 3 million hits per day, hitting almost four million in one day. Hundreds of images and videos were delivered by the site which delivered over 7 terrabytes of data—enough to deliver over 1800 feature length DVDs. It provided this with exceptional reliability—not a single site failure or lapse in delivery during those critical months.

As massive as this traffic was, bp.com, the official website of BP received even higher levels of traffic. At the time of heaviest traffic in late May the Deepwater Horizon site was registering about 4 million “hits” per day while bp.com registered 5.5 million views on May 27. The unique visitors was recorded as considerably higher on the bp.com site exceeding 23 million. This unusually high traffic on a responding company’s website was in part a result of the administration decision to largely eliminate BP from Unified Command communications. Under more typical ICS-managed response, the company involved would minimize independent communication and direct media and public interest to the response website. BP leaders also decided to use their corporate website, bp.com, as the company’s voice for the response rather than launch an incident-specific site. This was likely done based on the concern that continuing more routine business use of the bp.com site may have been perceived as a form of denial or dismissal of the significance of the event.

Other federal agencies directly involved in the response, including NOAA and EPA, also communicated independently of the Joint Information Center. The White House also began a blog communicating frequently about the administration’s activities related to the event. This meant, of course, that reporters and the public had multiple sources of information about the event rather than a single source as envisioned by the JIC planners. The total amount of web traffic on all sites directly related to the event cannot be accurately tracked. But with combined visits of over 300 million on the two primary websites, deepwaterhorizonresponse.com and bp.com, it can reasonably be estimated that total web traffic easily exceeded half a billion web visits with perhaps 30 million or more individuals directly seeking information about the event through event-related websites. This clearly does not count the immense amount of social media traffic also involved.

In late May BP established four PIER sites, one for each of the impacted states, to support the community relations activities in those states. Those sites also received significant traffic recording over 7 million hits by mid-August.

Since most agency and company web servers are designed to withstand peak traffic related to normal business operations, it is not unusual for an organization’s website to fail under the extreme loads during a crisis that usually involve both a high level of visits combined with strong interest resulting in multiple page views, downloading images, videos and documents. Understanding this reality combined with the perspective that losing a website at the time when it is most in-demand is unacceptable, PIER Systems has developed web infrastructure specifically designed to ensure reliable performance even under exceptional loads. This high volume and exceptional data transfer during this event validated the importance of this investment.

## *Information Development and Approvals*

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In any complex crisis event, particularly where activities are remote and geographically dispersed, the process of gathering relevant information, preparing it for public release and securing needed approvals is difficult and time consuming. While this has always been a problem, in the era of social media and instant news coverage the time lag can be fatal to the communication effort. There are now multiple sources of information and the media and public will turn to whoever provides the most immediate information. Every communicator in an actual event has struggled with the reality that by the time approvals are secured, the information to be delivered is no longer “news” and must be abandoned.

PIER facilitates the fast development of incident information and is designed to help speed the approval process. In the Gulf Spill literally thousands of documents were drafted, edited, reviewed and approved using PIER’s document management tools. Once approved, publishing to the website and distribution to thousands of contacts maintained in the system, are simultaneously accomplished in a single step. All documents are accessible and easily managed by response leaders supported by instant visibility of published documents, documents being drafted and edited, and ones that have been archived.

In many events where PIER and standard ICS/JIC processes are used, members of the JIC staff are stationed in the Planning section of the Emergency Operation Center or Incident Command Posts. As information about the response is received by the Planning Section, it is entered into a Situation Status report on PIER accessible by authorized users only. Then writers or information production specialists take that unapproved information and produce drafts of press release, information updates, fact sheets, etc., for review, approval and release. PIER tracks and displays all drafts so multiple people in dispersed locations can effectively work together to quickly edit and update information. Software used to support most Emergency Operation Centers is integrated with PIER to eliminate the information gathering process as ICS forms and internal situation updates are automatically entered into PIER from the EOC software. As an example, when PIER is used with CommandPro® Incident Management System from O’Brien’s, information gathering is further automated with draft information releases created automatically from selected ICS forms, then made available for review, approval and release.

In the Gulf Spill, the information gathering process was less than ideal for several reasons. The EOC software used did not integrate with PIER and, after the first few weeks of the response, the ICS/JIC model was transitioned to an ESF #15 model. While the ICS/JIC model has a clear information gathering function, ESF #15 does not. As a result, most information came in to the Joint Information Center and the External Affairs operation through members of individual agencies who had informal contacts with their counterparts in the Command Center. In effect, operational members from an agency or the responsible party would talk to their agency or company representatives in the External Affairs and JIC operations who would then relay it to EA/JIC leadership to begin the information production process. The NOAA representative in the EA/JIC would communicate directly with his or her agency contacts in the field or in the operations center and then relay any relevant information to those preparing releases and setting strategy. The same was true of BP and other major response agencies participating. Drafts were then prepared as draft documents within PIER, reviewed, approved and distributed via PIER.

## *Multiple Audiences and Millions of Distributions*

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The Gulf Spill was notable for a number of reasons including the volume of oil released and the unusual duration of an uncontrolled source of release. The scope of the event led to an exceptional level of media and public interest that was sustained over an unusually long period of time. In the instant news world, it is far more common for even major stories to appear and disappear relatively quickly, but this event did not follow that pattern. Consequently, the incident website absorbed an extraordinary level of traffic not just in daily volume, but also in the amount of information delivered over a five month period.

PIER enables site visitors, media, the public, elected officials or other stakeholders, to register themselves to receive updates through both email and text messages. On a typical day, ten or twelve information releases were published and distributed at a rate of approximately 240,000 emails per day plus several thousand text messages. Approximately 30 million email messages and about 50,000 text messages were delivered without disruption during the four months of activity.

From its inception PIER was developed around a philosophy that incorporated all audiences as equally important. While conventional public relations thinking focuses on providing information to the media first and foremost, PIER's philosophy is that the local mayor or school board president may be as important long term for the future of the organizations involved as the most prominent reporter—and they certainly believe they are. All audiences—fence-line neighbors, shareholders, customers, members of appropriations committees, congressional staffers, government regulators, industry consultants, bloggers, NGO leaders—all these and many more have an expectation, if not a right, to fast and efficient information about a major event and response. Consequently PIER is designed to manage contacts from all audiences, with a simple one-step process for delivering information simultaneously or in staged fashion to all audiences.

This philosophy of direct simultaneous communication was fully implemented in the Gulf Spill response. The Unified Command communicators had access to PIER's MediaTools to build media lists from a database of 300,000 reporters. But most people receiving the email and text updates added themselves to the mailing list using that function built into every PIER site. Individuals including reporters, bloggers and members of the public are added to the distribution list simply by submitting an inquiry form through the site, which also allows them to opt not to be added to the list. Approximately 50,000 people were added to the list this way in addition to others who added themselves to the list by using the PIER form. As the event began to wind down and lose public interest a significant number unsubscribed from the mailing list but even in mid-August the list included nearly 20,000 individuals who received multiple updates each day.

Foreign language translation of incident information emerged as a major concern in the early stages of the response. BP communication leaders were particularly concerned about the large Vietnamese speaking fishing communities deeply impacted by the spill. BP also wanted to insure that local translators were hired for the translations as part of their commitment to the communities most impacted by the incident. Within a couple of weeks the website featured flags of a number of nations indicating the availability of translated versions of major incident releases. Over 1,000 foreign language documents were published in 13 different languages.

Informal research demonstrated that the people who were visiting the website and/or receiving regular

updates had a considerably more complete and nuanced picture of the response than those who gained their perspective from media reports alone. Because it is in the nature of media coverage to focus on those items most certain of gaining reader or viewer attention, it is natural for most media consumers to have an incomplete and even distorted understanding of what is actually happening. Consequently, PIER Systems has long advised that the multiple-audience and direct communication capabilities offered by PIER be fully utilized in responding to an event. The Deepwater Horizon event clearly demonstrated both the impact of negative reporting on public opinion and the value of direct communication with audiences.

## ***Social Media Distribution, Engagement and Monitoring***

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The aggressive use of social media, particularly in the early Joint Information Center stage of the response, was notable and will likely set the standard for future large-scale responses. This was made possible in large part by the preparation by the US Coast Guard to use social media in all their communications, including crises. Under the leadership of former Commandant Thad Allen, the Coast Guard became noted as the federal agency with the most aggressive and innovative use of social media. Public affairs specialists in the Coast Guard became adept at using a variety of social media avenues and integrating these activities with PIER, which has been the standard platform for all public affairs activities in the US Coast Guard since approximately 2002. Consequently, the site template or pre-staged design chosen for the Deepwater Horizon incident website after Unified Command was formed was the new Public Information Assist Team (PIAT) template which PIER had developed for Coast Guard emergency response purposes. It incorporated social media sites directly into the homepage design including Flickr and YouTube for image and video distribution and Twitter and Facebook for links to those channels.

After the initial Unified Command JIC was established in Robert, Louisiana a team of social media experts was assembled primarily from the Coast Guard but also from the US Navy. These JIC members set up the Twitter accounts, Facebook page, Flickr page and YouTube feeds that would be so vital to the overall communications effort.

These efforts were certainly noted by the social media community who commented positively on the unusual commitment the response was showing to using these emerging communication channels. Digital communication experts also noted this success. Patrick Kerley, the Senior Digital Strategist at Levick Strategic Communications, one of the nation's most respected crisis communication firms, commented on his blog "Bulletproofblog" on May 24, 2010:

*First of all, one look at the multimedia content available on the site demonstrates an understanding that controlling the images is critical to successful crisis management. The site incorporates a range of visuals, including slideshows of clean-up efforts, diagrams of the spill containment attempts, videos of prevention efforts elsewhere, live streams of press conferences, and links to more images provided by government sites. Notably, the site does not try to hide the damage; instead, it transparently intersperses photos of affected wildlife and oily water with photos of active clean-up efforts.*

*Second, it's clear that the inclusion of social media on the Deepwater Horizon Response site is not a last-minute add-on; but rather an integral element. In addition to prominent links to related profiles on major social networks, the home page alone incorporates a Flickr slideshow, embedded YouTube video, and a*

*snapshot of current activity on Facebook. Such dedicated integration encourages active participation among visitors. As such, it's no coincidence that the Facebook page has 22,000 fans and the YouTube videos have been viewed a total of 1.75 million times – meaning that the Deepwater Horizon Unified Command is sending its message directly to its audience, rather than relying exclusively on reporters and the media filter.*

*Third, the site provides multiple resources for concerned citizens. From locality-specific contingency plans throughout the Gulf region to an ongoing response timeline and updated maps of the spill zone, the site offers all of the information that audiences are looking for. Additionally, a comprehensive FAQ page answers myriad questions – ranging from “Where can I check the status of a beach?” to “Is my drinking water safe?” to “What sampling is EPA doing along the beaches?”*

The Deepwater Horizon PIER site was the focal point for response communications with social media serving a vital support role. When significant new information was available for release it was prepared in a PIER document and published to the website. The staff running the Twitter and Facebook accounts then would “tweet” the headline or write on the Facebook page the brief summary and provide a link back to the document on the main site. This enabled the social media community to get a continual stream of relevant, updated information while enabling those interested to access more details on the published document.

In addition to the approximately 60,000 people who connected directly with the response through [deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://deepwaterhorizonresponse.com), the incident’s official Facebook page ([facebook.com/deepwaterhorizonresponse](https://facebook.com/deepwaterhorizonresponse)) connected with 40,000 “fans” by mid-August. The incident’s Twitter account, [twitter.com/oil\\_spill\\_2010](https://twitter.com/oil_spill_2010), connected with over 8500 followers by mid-August. Since the website, Facebook and Twitter all featured interactive engagement, approximately 100,000 individuals were directly and individually involved with interacting with the response. This undoubtedly sets a new standard for direct, Internet-mediated engagement with a major incident.

While Facebook and Twitter were the primary channels other than the website for distributing new information and engaging in conversation, Flickr and YouTube were also aggressively used as a means of more widely distributing images and videos. Response communicators used four methods of making response images and videos available: direct posting on PIER, posting on the Coast Guard’s visual image servers with links to the PIER website, posting on Flickr and YouTube with links to the website, and providing live video feeds. The live video feeds will be addressed separately.

By mid-August response communicators posted approximately 120 videos on YouTube and those videos received 2.5 million views directly on YouTube. Flickr was used to post images and to make those images widely available for downloading. There were almost 1000 images posted to the Flickr account and nearly a quarter of a million direct views on Flickr. In addition, a number of images and videos were also published on the Coast Guard’s visual image gallery on their own servers and a number of images and videos were published directly on PIER. All the images and videos, regardless of their physical location, were made accessible to the public and media primarily through the [deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://deepwaterhorizonresponse.com) website. No doubt, viewing these items contributed significantly to the 150 million hits received by the site and the high levels of data transfer provided. The setup involving using the primary website to deliver content from the various social media sites and outside servers was facilitated by having created a template in advance of this event, anticipating this kind of integrated use well in advance of its need. It is a best practice we recommend should be emulated by all agencies and organization in

anticipation of major events.

As in virtually all aspects of the event, the use of social media changed significantly from the early stages of the response to the middle and late stages. As will be highlighted in the section on organization and structure, the initial stage was structured as an ICS/JIC response with the social media team operating with a high degree of flexibility in exercising their own good judgment under the direction of the PIO. There were times when that judgment was questioned by the JIC leadership. When the administration took a much stronger hand in communications, the social media team lost its autonomy and the use of social media changed from a stronger engagement and discussion opportunity to primarily alerting the social media community to new updates of information prepared under the direction of the administration. This significantly slowed the flow of information as well as limited the value of the engagement.

While the social media team in the Deepwater Horizon event managed social media content separately from PIER, a best practice used by other PIER clients is to distribute social media content through PIER. Using PIER's RSS capability (see below under "Widgets and Turtle Talk") drafts of "tweets" or Facebook content can be created in PIER, edited, approved and then distributed to these channels. The content would be simultaneously published on the PIER website ensuring consistent and maximum exposure, but most importantly, the information discipline process so important for NIMS compliance would be assured. A complete record of all distributions is also stored for review of past activities involving social media.

There are two significant values to social media in a response of this nature. One is to contribute to the wide distribution of information directly to interested audiences and engage them in conversation, the other is to use social media to listen to the discussion about the event and quickly capture new information and issues as they emerge from that discussion. This function, social media monitoring, was also an important part of the External Affairs operation. The response communication team used multiple tools to monitor social media. Sysomos, Twitscoop, GoogleAlerts, and PIER MediaTools were all used to capture and track information and discussion relevant to the response. One senior communication leader from the Coast Guard commented that this monitoring was very important in understanding emerging issues and helped to drive not only communication strategy but also response strategy to some degree.

As the information flow and approval process became increasingly bureaucratic and approval times lagged, the External Affairs and JIC teams were often caught behind by the rapid nature of social media information sharing. One situation illustrates the challenge. In late June, BP had a containment cap on the spill source and was capturing a significant amount of the oil from the well. Live video feeds from multiple Remote Operated Vehicles (ROVs) showed the continuing but diminished flow. That morning, an individual watching the live video feeds noticed an increase in the flow. The containment cap had slipped resulting in more oil flowing into the Gulf. He commented on this on a blog and his comment soon made its way to the media. Soon major media outlets were reporting that the containment cap had slipped and more oil was flowing into the gulf. Social media monitoring in the External Affairs operation noted the trending topic and the Joint Information Center shortly after began receiving calls for comment from the media. No information about the cap slipping had been relayed from the response organization to the JIC or External Affairs. Contacts with the Command Center, located one floor above External Affairs and two floors above the JIC in downtown New Orleans, confirmed the slippage and loss of containment. The communicators went to work on preparing an information release for the website to answer

media and public questions. However, by this time in the response the approval process had slowed to such a degree that final approval for release to the website was not secured until nearly 8 p.m. that evening, even though the first indication of the problem was in the morning. By the time the release about loss of containment was approved, the cap had been fixed and containment restored so the release was completely out of date. Those watching the live video feeds, or simply following the discussion on social media had the information about the loss and the restoration of containment well before the official communication could be distributed.

### ***Virtual Communication Management***

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PIER was created with the understanding that the people who need to work together will simply never be in the same place at the same time in any sizeable event. By moving all communication functions onto a web platform and combining these functions with internal communication tools, a dispersed team can effectively work together. During the Gulf Spill as many as 200 to 300 communicators have been involved at one time, many of them in locations from London, to Washington DC to the Gulf to the West Coast. On a typical day during the response 40 to 50 communicators were working on the same PIER system at the same time, located thousands of miles apart, engaged in very diverse communication activities. This virtual collaboration is an essential element of communication management, even when a Joint Information Center is fully staffed.

### ***Secure Access for Users from Multiple Response Organizations—NIMS Compliance***

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NIMS/ICS/JIC anticipates the fast development of an ad-hoc team consisting of individuals from many different agencies and, in certain events such as spills, the Responsible Party to manage the response and the communications. As the incident website and Internet-based communications have become increasingly important in the last few years, this multi-agency response poses some challenges for IT departments who are charged with Internet or “cyber” security for their organizations. The almost universal response of the IT leaders is to ensure that no one other than authorized members from their own agency have access to web content tools and distributions to lists owned by the agency or organization. While this is understandable, it is incompatible with NIMS in a coordinated response because under NIMS the responsibility for providing access passes to Unified Command and cannot be superseded by agency IT policies or processes. That means the Internet tools to be used must be accessible to whomever Unified Command designates. The alternative would be the equivalent to a fire department providing trucks for a fire, but with the stipulation that only staff from that department could use them. These kinds of rules would clearly limit Unified Command’s ability to appoint key positions and exercise their authority under the law.

This has been a key component of PIER, which was designed in response to a pipeline explosion event where ICS and JIC structures were used. In that case, the incident website was provided by the local agency and could only be accessed by the local agency under the specific direction of the local emergency manager. This proved a significant limitation in fast preparation and distribution of information. PIER was intended from its inception as a “Switzerland” system, neutral territory to all parties and therefore fully controllable by Unified Command and the designated PIO without any limitations imposed by the IT policies or dictates of any agency.

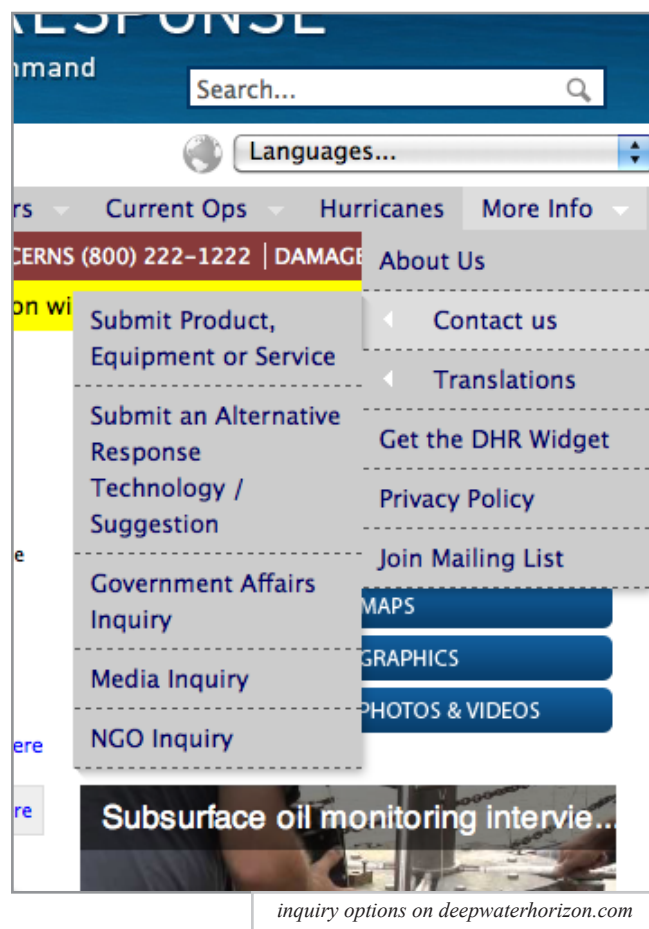
This shared access of the [deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://deepwaterhorizonresponse.com) website by a variety of different communicators from different agencies, including the Responsible Party, became an issue for the administration when it was decided to abandon the ICS/JIC model and put the Department of Homeland Security and White House communication staff in direct control of the communications. Even though (through the office of the National Incident Commander) the Department had full control over access to the PIER System, the discomfort over this NIMS-based approach was an underlying reason for the attempted transition to the new DHS/White House response site [restorethegulf.gov](http://restorethegulf.gov). While the initial intention was to replace the [deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://deepwaterhorizonresponse.com) PIER site with this DHS controlled site, PIER functions could not be easily duplicated and both sites operated in tandem after the [.gov](http://.gov) site was launched through the end of September.

## ***Managing Public Engagement—Inquiry Management and Forms***

Unified Command placed a high value on direct engagement with the public which can likely be attributed to the US Coast Guard's leadership in web-based communication and social media. PIER includes an inquiry management system as well as the ability to quickly create forms and surveys used to capture input from the public and inject into databases. Over 60,000 individual questions and comments were submitted to the Deepwater Horizon website using PIER's inquiry management system and an additional 15,000 were submitted on the four state sites managed by BP. This does not include the additional tens of thousands of forms used to submit a claim, to make an alternative response technology suggestion, to submit a vessel for the Vessel of Opportunity program, or to provide feedback on community meetings.

The [deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://deepwaterhorizonresponse.com) website facilitated the submission of these inquiries and forms by having a selection of options available from the homepage under the "More Info" main tab. Communication leaders fully managed the set up, distributions and responses to these various interactive forms. There was no need for IT involvement, "webmasters" or programmers to set up and manage the inquiry or forms functions.

Anyone coming to the website can submit an inquiry or use a form and well over 100,000 people did. Reporters used the form to ask specific questions not covered by information provided on the website, members of the affected communities used it both ask specific questions about very specific impacts such as status of particular beaches or marshlands or to express their opinion. Others used it to submit ideas for controlling the spill or minimizing damage, to



inquire about claims and to express their opinion. Unified Command communication leaders, working with experienced PIER staff, created 35 different categories of inquiries. Different External Affairs or JIC staff were designated to respond to inquiries based on these categories. This allowed the use of Subject Matter Experts as well as those prepared specifically to respond appropriately to sensitive topics. PIER automatically directs inquiries to the designated responder or team based on the inquiries. That means when someone submitting an inquiry and selects the topic “Claims Information”, that inquiry is immediately and automatically routed

Marked\* fields are required  
I belong to the following group: Government Go

Salutation: [dropdown]  
First Name\*: [text field]  
Last Name\*: [text field]  
Email\*: [text field]  
Association/Business: [text field]  
Title: [text field]  
Address: [text field]  
City: [text field]  
State: [text field]  
Zip/postal code: [text field]  
Phone: [text field]

Topic/Category: -- Please Select -- [dropdown]  
Question/Comments\*: [text area]

Deadline: [text field]  
Please Respond By: Email [dropdown]

example inquiry form

to the staff designated to deal with claims questions. Since all activities relating to every inquiry are fully tracked in PIER, the information about anyone who has viewed, provided information or responded to the inquirer was available to the External Affairs staff charged with managing this process. Reports showed the number of open, pending and closed inquiries in each category and summary reports showed average time from submission to close.

Given the level of interactivity, it was clear early on that an expanded team would be needed to manage all the inquiries being submitted. Inquiry management is particularly suited to virtual operation because all elements of the process were included in PIER and fully tracked. Consequently, Unified Command External Affairs leadership and BP coordinated in dispersing the work of reviewing, categorizing, developing approved answers and responding to inquiries. All inquiries received a personal response, except for these deemed extremely hostile or threatening because security officers for BP directed that no response be provided. The work of managing and responding to these was provided primarily by PIER staff located in company offices in Bellingham, WA coordinating directly with PIER staff located with Unified Command in Robert, Louisiana or New Orleans. Public relations contractors working for BP in London provided additional response support. During the peak of the response in late May to mid-June, typically five to seven responders per day were focused on managing inquiries averaging nearly 1000 inquiries per day. In some periods of high activity as many as seven inquiries per minute were received. Peak activity typically occurred along with 24/7 press coverage related to anticipated well capping and subsequent failures. Because of organization challenges, strategy questions and response approvals there were times when response turnaround slowed to multiple days. When such issues were resolved turnaround time was targeted at two to four hours. All responses were under the direct management of Unified Command’s JIC or External Affairs leadership.

PIER provides an “Answer” function in which approved statements and answers to inquiries are made available to the inquiry responders by way of a pull-down menu of potential answers directly on the screen displaying the inquiry. This enables exceptionally efficient response with fully vetted responses, while still providing the opportunity for the responder to add a personal message.

There is much to learn from this event and other major events from the inquiries received. Monitoring inquiries along with social media enabled response communication leaders to accurately and quickly identify emerging trends and issues, rumors, response information emerging from outside the operations, and public sentiment. This information helped drive strategy both for communications and response actions. Inquiries and forms were used on the website to encourage and facilitate the public reporting of tarballs, oiled shorelines, wildlife, etc. It is beyond the scope of this case study to provide an in-depth analysis of the nature of inquiries but a brief overview can assist crisis communicators in preparing to respond to large scale events. The following are major issues that emerged:

***Volunteers and Suggestions*** – the largest category of inquiries and public engagement was in submitting ideas to help the response and offers to volunteer. It is vitally important as part of preparing for a response to have in place procedures to respond to these inquiries. BP put in place a system to evaluate all Alternative Response Technology suggestions, which numbered over 100,000. The evaluation team was led by Jim O’Brien, Chairman Emeritus and Founder of O’Brien’s Response Management (PIER’s parent company) and the most respected figure in oil spill response. This team evaluated all suggestions, triaging them and forwarding the most promising to Unified Command and the BP engineering team.

***Job Searches*** – nearly every major response involves people looking for work and the communication team must be prepared to respond to these, particularly if there is a need for additional help. In the Deepwater Horizon incident more than 60,000 individuals were involved in the response with approximately one third of them in a paid role. Contractors to BP managed this process so Unified Command was able to direct those searching for work toward the right contacts. The individual state sites received a higher percentage of job searches than the Unified Command site.

***Negative***—the second highest category in this event were the thousands of negative comments. Many of these were emotionally charged, highly political, vulgar and abusive. Some threatened violent action and these were referred to security and did not receive a personal response. Response communication leaders felt it was important to facilitate this expression and respond for several reasons. It provides a release of emotion in an event that is severely impacting the environment and people’s lives, it provides a weather vane by which to help understand both the issues and the intensity of those issues, and responding can help defuse even some of the strongest expressions. While the strategy of “a kind answer turns away wrath” did not succeed in most cases, no doubt the fact that many people received a welcoming, courteous and reasonably prompt personal reply was beneficial.

***Claims*** – those impacted were obviously eager to get information about how to seek compensation and while this is not typically seen as a JIC or crisis communication role, this event may very well change that understanding. The issue of claims payment and speed of processing became one of the most significant of the response ultimately involving the White House and the escrow fund paid by BP. As a result, claims information became a significant part of all communication.

***Subject Matter Expert questions*** – most of the other questions fell into areas of special interest many of which required access to subject matter experts within the response. One of the greatest challenges facing those managing the inquiry responses and trying to meet response target times was gaining access to

specific information not available as part of approved and released updates. This is important in providing a clear channel of communication between the JIC/EA function and operation Subject Matter Experts.

## *Text and Two-Way Text Messaging*

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Text and automated-phone messaging, sometimes called mass notification, is one of the functions built into the PIER platform. Unified Command made use of these opportunities by offering to send text message updates from PIER, using the two-way SMS (text) messaging capability to allow the public to sign up to receive only the updates on the topics they chose. This is accomplished easily in PIER by setting up “gateways” with designated codes that feed the incoming text message into PIER’s inquiry management system. As can be seen in the example from the [deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://deepwaterhorizonresponse.com) website below, visitors can sign up to receive Florida-specific updates by texting “FL@gulf” to 84469. The 84469 is PIER’s SMS short-code and “gulf” is the keyword for all gulf texts related to this particular website. “FL” directs that particular text message to an inquiry category set up in PIER. From there it is treated as any other inquiry which means it can be automatically directed to specific team members or those submitting to that can be selected for text distributions. This same process was used to facilitate reporting impacted wildlife, beaches or other environmental concerns.

This capability of PIER to manage two-way communications using email and text messages was also used to help manage the tens of thousand of people involved in responding. Email and text alerts were sent to employees relating particularly to severe storms or hurricane warnings. The two-way text capability allowed employees to

- For information on all Deepwater Horizon Response Gulf and breaking news, text **news@gulf** to 84469.
- State-specific information can be obtained by texting the following codes:
  - For Florida alerts, text **FL@gulf** to 84469
  - For Mississippi alerts, text **MS@gulf** to 84469
  - For Louisiana alerts, text **LA@gulf** to 84469
  - For Alabama alerts, text **AL@gulf** to 84469.
- Topic specific information can be obtained by texting the following codes:
  - For information on affected wildlife, text **wildlife@gulf** to 84469
  - For information on beach closures and cleanup, text **beach@gulf** to 84469
  - For information on air quality monitoring from the EPA, text **air@gulf** to 84469
  - For information on water quality monitoring, text **water@gulf** to 84469
  - For fishing information / closures, text **fishing@gulf** to 84469

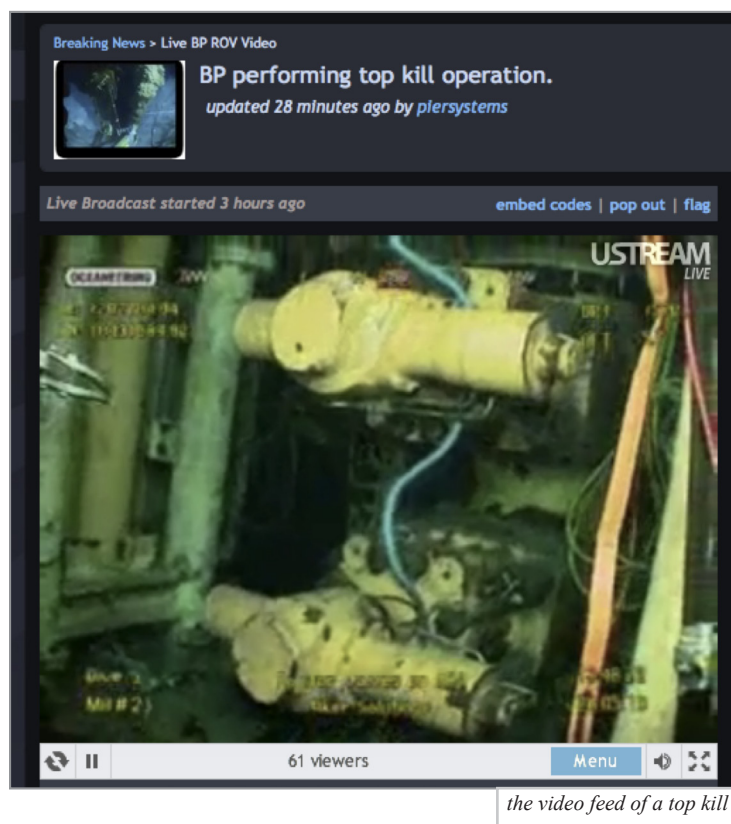
*example of text messaging options utilized by the deepwater horizon response*

report that they were OK, or in need of assistance and the kind of assistance needed.

## Live Video

Live video feeds from a mile beneath the surface provided some of the lasting images and legacies of this event. One of the most important legacies of the spill may well be that live video, if possible and relevant, will be provided from key locations during an event or response. In the same way that embedded reporters in the Iraq war, using satellite and Internet communications, brought the war into the living rooms of homes around the world, live video will enable the media and the public to become virtual bystanders in almost any major event.

BP's extensive technical capabilities included use of a number of Remotely Operated Vehicle submarines, known as ROVs, serving as eyes and hands at the bottom of the ocean a mile beneath the surface. These were equipped with video cameras allowing operators to observe the wellhead and damaged Blow Out Preventer from the BP control room in Houston. Coast Guard response leaders were given access to this video footage as part of response management. It came to the attention of a member of Congress that this video footage was being used to help try and contain the flowing oil and calls were issued for its public release. Representative Ed Markey of Massachusetts criticized both BP and the Coast Guard for not providing the feeds to the public. BP agreed and PIER technical staff were asked to make the video feeds available through the response website.



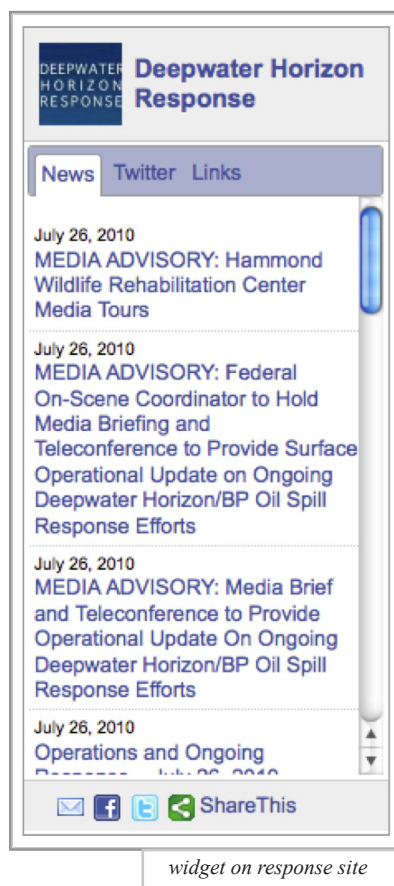
Streaming video is very data intensive and knowing the high levels of public interest and the resulting demand, it was important to deliver the feed reliably. Additionally, since there were six ROVs, it was decided to provide feeds from all of them. Any disruption, editing, curtailment of delivery or limitation on full access no doubt would have added to the accusations against BP and to the atmosphere of mistrust. Shortly after launch the feeds were being viewed by 3600 different people at a data speed of 300 megabytes per second. Within a few days, the feeds were moved to commercial servers with very large capacity. Tens of thousands of individuals viewed the live feeds simultaneously while millions viewed them through cable news, network news and delivery through other websites. Soon the data was measured not in terabytes (billions of megabytes) but in petabytes (millions of megabytes) but in petabytes

(billions of megabytes). On one day alone, June 9, live video feeds demanded 38 terabytes of data transfer. Within a few weeks of beginning delivery, the cost of bandwidth from the commercial servers for BP exceeded three million dollars. Unified Command External Affairs in late June expanded the live video feeds coming from the ROVs

to include live video from the deck of a Coast Guard Cutter, from a wildlife restoration center and from a C-130 aircraft searching for oil slicks. It is likely that costs to provide the multiple video feeds for his event may be in excess of fifteen million dollars.

The question has been raised whether BP should have provided the live feeds given the reality that watching the oil flow from the wellhead under high pressure for weeks on end no doubt contributed to the public anger and frustration over the failures to stop the spill. Almost certainly similar questions will arise in future events when live videos feeds are demanded. Decisions may be made for security, safety or political reasons to refuse the public demand. But it almost certain that the media, the public and elected officials will demand live video if there is any possible way of providing them. Crisis communicators and emergency response planners would do well to include this new element in future response plans.

### *Widgets, Turtle Talk and Other Technology Innovations*



The Unified Command External Affairs team continually discussed and planned how they could expand the delivery of information to a public that seemed incessant in its demands and interest. Widgets and the use of simultaneous webcasting with online chat were two of the innovations developed during this event that will likely have significance in the future.

A widget is a programming device, which in this context, enables content from one site to be automatically displayed on other websites in a specific display. It is becoming increasingly common to have content, such as information releases, from one site be set to automatically feed other sites. For PIER a typical application would be a regional emergency operation center website that accumulates and re-posts information drawn from websites from other jurisdictions, thereby creating a centralized news source for regional information. This function relies on RSS feeds. RSS, Really Simple Syndication, is an established method on the Internet for easy information or content sharing. All content from PIER is RSS-capable which means it delivers the recognizable RSS logo in the web address window and generates the feed address which can be pasted into website pages, on social media sites, or other Internet applications that accept RSS feeds. This is also the means by which content generated in PIER can be distributed to Twitter and Facebook or other social media channels such as blogs.

A widget is another way of easily sharing information across different sites. In the case of the Deep Water Horizon site, widget programming code was made available on the website with instructions on how to add that code to another site. When applied, a small box appeared on the destination website that provided a continuous feed of content from deepwaterhorizonresponse.com. There were three tabs built into this widget: News, Twitter

and Links. The News tab, when selected, displayed all the information releases approved and published by External Affairs. The Twitter tab displayed all the Twitter feeds as they were “tweeted.” And the Links tab provided links to other relevant sites or specific content on the Deepwater Horizon site. This proved a popular device that further helped distribute a continual flow of information to those interested.



“Turtle Talk” refers to an External Affairs event planned by the social media team. What is of interest here is how the “Turtle Talk” event was conducted on the PIER site and how it was set up by the PIER technical staff. There was very strong public interest in the issues of turtles and the impact of the spill. Unified Area Command planned to move 700 sea turtle nests to protect them from oil and External Affairs believed it would be valuable to make the experts involving in planning and executing this event accessible directly to the interested public. The PIER technical staff was called on to set up the webcast from the Audubon Aquarium in New Orleans, involved a panel of experts including TV host Jeff Corwin. To facilitate live discussion, a live chat room was established enabling the public to pose questions directly to the panel. The response’s Twitter feed was also used to enable the

public to pose questions, all of which were then answered immediately by the panel via the webcast. All of this was delivered on a PIER web page on the deepwaterhorizonresponse.com site on July 16. Additional information about the panelists was also displayed on the same page. This unique combination of various real-time technologies, facilitating direct interaction, may very well play an important role in the future not only in crisis communication, but organizational communication as well.

## Management Reporting

There is an axiom in management that says you cannot manage what you cannot measure. Measurements in communications, particularly crisis communication, have always been a major challenge. The communication leaders of the Deepwater Horizon event were aided in their planning, supervision and management by the extraordinary level of communication activity reporting provided by PIER.

Every detail of the communication activity that involves PIER is tracked. Only the internal chat room, PIER Conference Room, does not record the conversation. All actions of anyone logged in, all drafting and editing, all publishing of content, all inquiries, all responses, everything is tracked and available for reports. The reporting system makes it very easy to generate reports relating to individual PIER users, document status or inquiries. For example, the Chief of Strategic Communications for the National Incident Commander in Washington DC could at

any time build a report on inquiries relating to a topic such as “burning turtles”. He would be able to see the volume of inquiries, their nature, the responses being used, the delivery time, and all users who may have been involved in the response.

If a question arose as to which of the more than 40 to 50 users per day was responsible for a specific action on PIER, this information could be generated in seconds. When a high placed government official complained about not getting information, the log report helped demonstrate to him that someone on this staff had inadvertently unsubscribed him from the distribution list.

Every one of the estimated 30 million emails distributed were recorded and can be used to verify distribution. PIER also shows delivery of text and phone messages and can be used to verify receipts of emails and phone messages.

### ***Other Response Websites***

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While the [deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://deepwaterhorizonresponse.com) website was the primary voice of the response and specifically the voice of Unified Command, it was certainly not the only website used by those involved in the response.

As will be discussed in the section on organization and structure, the response communications initially began as a Joint Information Center (JIC) operation in conformance with NIMS and OPA 90 and as practiced by the oil industry, the US Coast Guard and EPA since the Oil Pollution Act led to its use. Because the intent of these regulations and systems is to assist public information by ensuring a single voice for the response and the authority of Unified Command over that voice, there is typically only one incident website. Specific agencies such as US Coast Guard, EPA, local or state response agencies and the Responsible Party would all direct inquiries back to the JIC website or at the most, provide direct links to it on their sites. Only in such a system is NIMS compliance assured, which mandates Command control over response information.

When the Joint Information Center structure began to be replaced by a more top-down national disaster model, beginning with Secretary Napolitano’s initial visit to Unified Command on May 5th, the EPA and NOAA began communicating more aggressively about the spill response on their own websites. BP similarly slowly began to take a more proactive stance in communications outside of the JIC. Eventually, [bp.com](http://bp.com) became the primary focal point for BP response communications and it far exceeded the traffic on the Unified Command site. BP quickly implemented on-the-ground community relations activities in the four states impacted by the spill when it became clear that oil would come onshore. Those community relations efforts were supported by the launch of four interrelated PIER sites, one for each of the affected states. The state sites were launched in June and by late August were receiving more traffic than the Unified Command website. PIER communication services leadership and PIER communication staff plus contractors were directly involved in setting up, planning and day-to-day management of these state sites.

Additional PIER sites were used to communicate specifically about the Deepwater Horizon investigation. This was done to separate the investigation function and the communication around that from the response activities. BP also used a PIER site to communicate with and coordinate activities with the hundreds of employees and contractors engaged in the community relations efforts. This was an internal-only site used to provide metrics, report on activities conducted in each of these states, provide relevant talking points on a day-to-day basis and

respond to questions from community relations personnel. When FEMA sent over 100 staff to assist with the response, they requested a PIER site to be used to coordinate information gathered by the staff as they deployed around the region. PIER staff trained over 120 of these staff members enabling them to provide information status reports on a shared internal PIER site.

### ***RestoretheGulf.gov***

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A final note on web communications must address the issue of the addition of a new website on July which was promoted as the official website of the response. On July 4 the White House announced that the [deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://deepwaterhorizonresponse.com) website was being replaced by a new website that would provide a complete source for the government's activities in the response. [RestoretheGulf.gov](http://RestoretheGulf.gov) was launched and a message placed on [deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://deepwaterhorizonresponse.com) indicating that it was being replaced with the new website. While never entirely clear on their reasons for wanting this change, it is assumed that there was discomfort with PIER as a Joint Information Center website because it allowed access to users from different agencies involved in the response, including BP. Leaders within DHS were clearly more comfortable with a website that was controlled only by those they designated, even after Unified Command clearly communicated that they were the only authority deciding who would have user access and who would not.

Despite the plan to fully assume all web communication functions on the new site, the multiple functions of PIER were not easily or quickly replicated on the DHS-controlled site. So the decision was made to continue to promote [RestoretheGulf.gov](http://RestoretheGulf.gov) as the official website of the response while maintaining the public access to [deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://deepwaterhorizonresponse.com). Information published to [restorethegulf.gov](http://restorethegulf.gov) was created in PIER, vetted and when approved, emailed to DHS representatives who loaded it into the new site. All the back-office functions of PIER including forms, inquiries, text alerts, email distributions, social media connections continued largely unchanged through the duration of Unified Command, through the end of September.

## *Summary on Internet Communications*

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Lessons learned from the Gulf Spill related to Internet communications include:

- As in this event, full featured websites will be a focal point for major responses in the future. They will be a primary means of presenting information for the media as well as directly to interested publics.
- Pushing information out to those seeking information is increasingly important. It became clear that those receiving direct email and text messages were better informed and had a more positive and accurate perception of the response than those who relied exclusively on the media.
- Social media channels are an essential element of crisis and emergency communication, but these channels change continually and response leaders must be committed to communicating with audiences how and where they demand.
- While the new web based technologies such as PIER make virtual response a reality by allowing responders to participate from almost anywhere, those involved also reported the importance of being face to face, building relationships with the other responders, and having direct conversations.
- Technology can solve some of the structural problems of information sharing, decision-making and rapid distribution, but it cannot solve the age-old problem of “too many cooks in the kitchen.” In other words, response leaders must vigorously resist the inherent tendency to add overly burdensome layers of vetting and approval. As the approval process calcified by a stronger and stronger top-down presence, the value of the External Affairs and JIC operation diminished to the point where in many issues and situations it had no voice. As it doesn’t work to have multiple approval layers over the specific on-the-ground actions of the Operations Section, the communication function cannot operate with multiple layers of top-down directives and approvals.

## Section Two: Media Management and Coverage

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The Gulf Spill was a singular event in media coverage. Most events in the news come and go quickly largely because media outlets compete on the basis of immediacy and focus on the activities happening right now. Because of the Internet, audiences also have far greater opportunity to get information about events of interest to them. Consequently, wide-spread attention on a specific event is unusual, and very unusual when that interest is sustained over a long period time.

This section will provide an overview of the massive amount of media coverage, reveal how Unified Command and BP tracked and analyzed this coverage, and how they worked to provide the information the media were seeking. The issue of media access will be addressed and a brief overview of the phases and trends of coverage, focusing on some of the underlying reasons for the major stories and issues that emerged.

### *Section Two Summary*

*This event will be marked as historic in the annals of media coverage for several reasons. Few events in recent history have commanded the level of public and media attention for such a prolonged period of time. In a time of mainstream media change it demonstrated the critical importance of the media in communicating important information and forming public perception. At the same time, from an insider's perspective, the hyper-competitiveness of the media and the extensive use of infotainment techniques did much to inflame public outrage, support the agendas of attention-seeking elected officials, and drive the administration's intensive oversight of the communication in this event. A close analysis of media coverage and the message strategies used by Unified Command, BP and the administration provide important lessons for those interested in reputation management, political strategy, emergency and crisis communication. The real story of this event is how those three elements came together to redefine how communication will be managed in large-scale events in the future.*

## Public Interest and Massive Coverage

During the spring and summer of 2010, public interest and news coverage was completely dominated by the Gulf Spill. The repeated failures of the responders to stem the flow, the numerous complaints from “experts” about lack of preparation and inadequate response, heart-wrenching accounts of lives and communities disrupted, the tension of oil approaching sensitive beaches, marshes and endangered species, political leaders jockeying to avoid any fallout and competing for air time as public defenders, NGOs using the public concern to advance specific agendas—all these created a continual flow of news coverage, personal and Internet conversations, and often intense group and individual activism.

The accompanying charts from the Pew Research Center for People and the Press demonstrated the exceptionally high public interest and the high levels of media coverage. Despite the near continuous coverage during times of heightened activity and hundreds of thousands of news stories, there still was a significant gap in the ratio of public interest to the amount of news coverage. On May 5, near the beginning of the spill, Pew reported that 41% of the public identified the spill as the story of most interest to them, while the story consumed 16% of the “news hole” or the total amount of news. Remarkably, a month later the news interest had climbed to 58% while the news coverage now amounted to nearly 40% of total news coverage. In late June, news coverage reached its peak at 44% of the news hole, and public interest was still very high with 63% saying they were following the spill most closely of all stories.

At that time, the public felt that the news coverage was about right but the previous high rankings for how the spill was being covered were declining substantially.

The Pew Research Center study on media coverage, issued August 25, noted the singular nature of this event by comparing the length of coverage to other major events. Other events such as the Virginia Tech shooting, the collapse of the I-35W bridge in Minneapolis and the West Virginia mine incident all followed a familiar pattern which the study referred to as “one week wonders.” While the news hole percentage of these stories at their peak was very high, 25% to 50% typically, the coverage dropped dramatically after a few days.

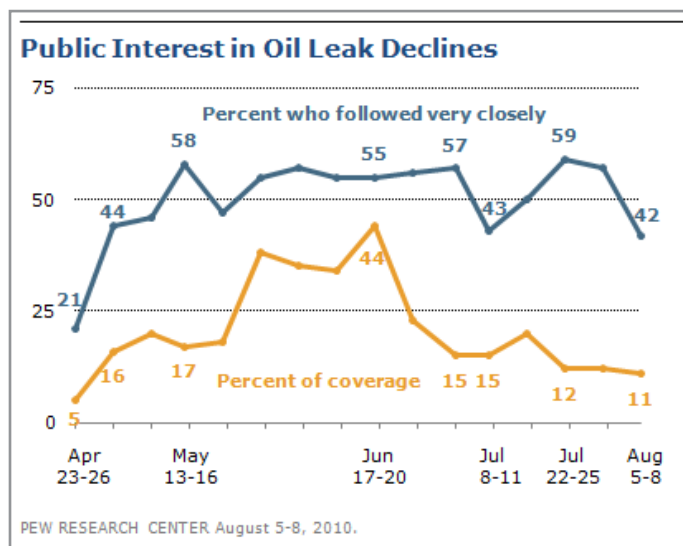


fig. 1

### Public Sees Right Amount of Gulf Leak Coverage...

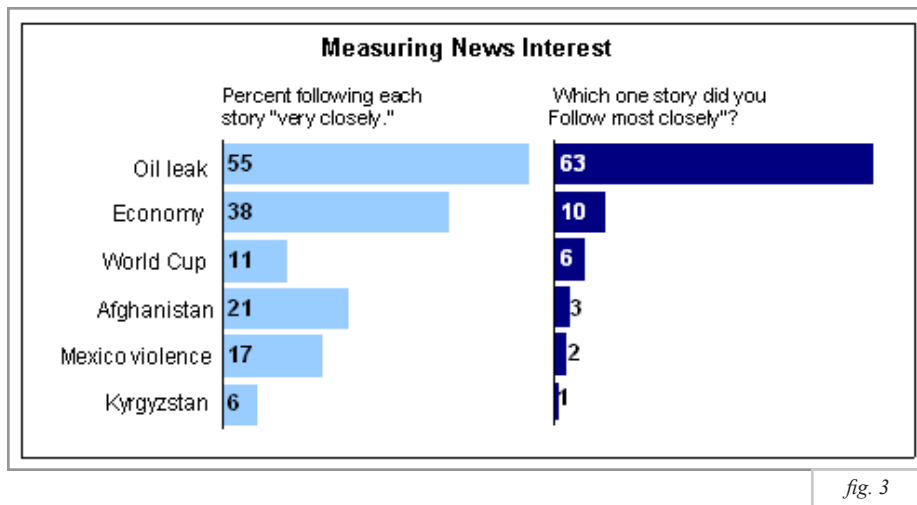
|              | May<br>20-23 | Jun<br>17-20 |
|--------------|--------------|--------------|
|              | %            | %            |
| Too much     | 14           | 19           |
| Too little   | 24           | 21           |
| Right amount | 59           | 53           |
| Don't know   | 3            | 6            |
|              | 100          | 100          |

### And Rates Coverage Positively

|                | May<br>7-10 | Jun<br>17-20 |
|----------------|-------------|--------------|
|                | %           | %            |
| Excellent/Good | 66          | 56           |
| Only fair/Poor | 30          | 42           |
| Don't know     | 4           | 3            |
|                | 100         | 100          |

Pew Research Center June 17-20, 2010.  
Figures may not add to 100% because of rounding.

fig. 2

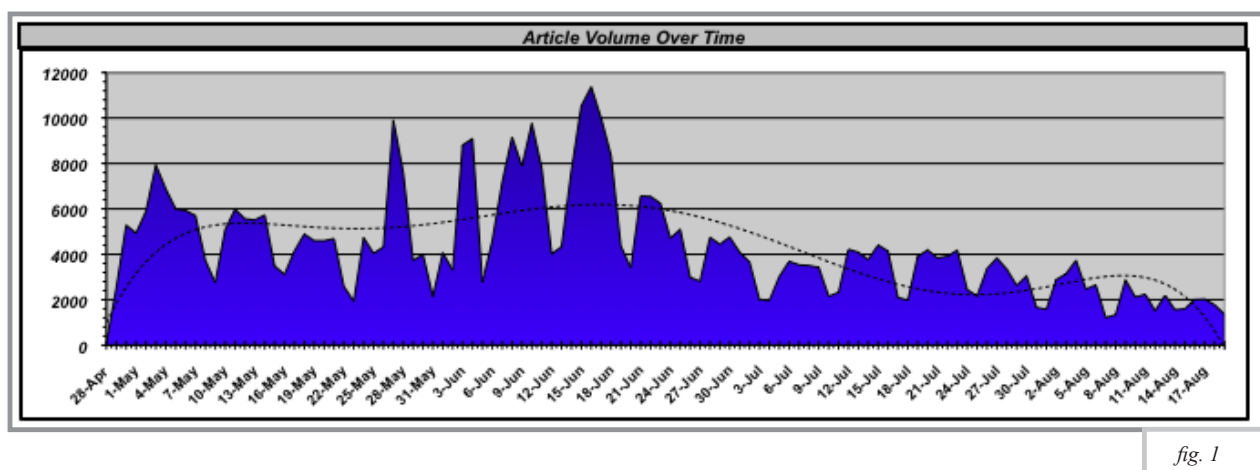


An exception was the disaster in Haiti, but even that declined from a peak of 41% of the news hole to 3% by week six. In contrast, the Deepwater Horizon event sustained an average of 22% of the news hole from April 20 through July 28, almost twice the average of the next highest story, the economy at 12%.

## Media Tracking and Analysis

According to the National Response Team JIC Model, one of the important functions of the JIC is to monitor the media coverage and provide information about the coverage of value to Unified Command. The External Affairs and JIC organizations of the response, along with BP communicators, did closely monitor media reports as well as social media activities and this analysis played a role in helping Unified Command understand the sentiments and topics of interest to the public and the media. This guided not only communication messaging but in some cases specific response plans to address emerging concerns.

PIER includes media monitoring and other media management tools embedded within the control system. The monitoring system within PIER allows users to track essentially all media stories using keywords including establishing email alerts. This includes print stories, online, blogs, broadcast and selected social media. Clips can be easily captured and permanently stored. Broadcast reports can be quickly identified, viewed and selected portions stored permanently. In addition, extensive analysis and reporting is available. Both the US Coast Guard and BP were subscribers to MediaTools as part of their PIER subscription which is an add-on option. Because of



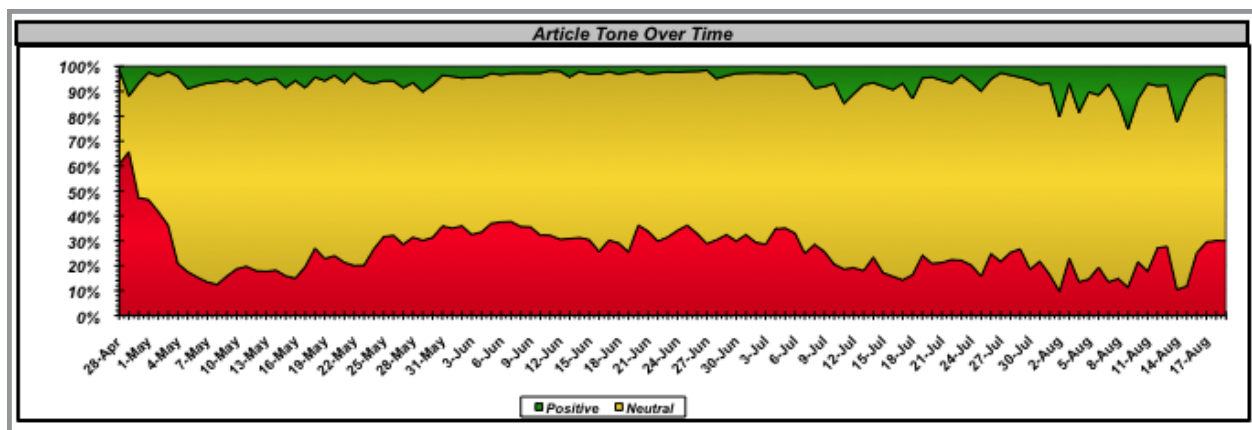


fig. 2

this they were adept at using the media management tools but also had an understanding of the capability to meet specific analysis requirements. BP contracted with the third-party supplier of Media Tools to provide a custom report of all spill related coverage including tonality analysis that was determined not only by algorithmic studies of keywords, but also by trained public relations specialists who would complement the computer analysis with human analysis. The result was a complete daily record of all coverage, summaries of the major stories, plus charts of comparative coverage volume with tonality analysis.

The media coverage reporting and analysis was focused on major mainstream but did include blogs and social media. However, the social media team in the EA/JIC operation conducted additional social media monitoring and analysis. One tool used by the responders was Sysomos, an online tool for aggregating social media content and conversations and providing automated analysis. This proved to be an important component of social media monitoring. The standard social media monitoring tools were also used including Twitscoop and Google Alerts. Since the response was managing its own Facebook page and Twitter account, it was informative to follow the conversations conducted on those sites as well.

## ***Geographic Distribution of Public Information Officers***

An event with the scope and geographic spread of the Deepwater Horizon event presents significant challenges for meeting media access and information demands and still maintaining some level of management control and information discipline. Initially the primary Joint Information Center was located in a Shell training facility in Robert, Louisiana, a few miles north of Lake Pontchartrain between Hammond and Covington. This was the initial location of Unified Area Command. A major Incident Command Post (ICP) was established in Houma, Louisiana. This would be the focal point for efforts to contain the oil and respond to oiling of beaches and wildlife. A JIC was established for the Houma ICP. Another major command post was established in Mobile, Alabama. This was focused on the containment and clean-up operations involving Alabama, Mississippi and Florida. While Houma's JIC was fairly minimal, focusing on having on-the-ground PIOs to assist media in that area, the Mobile Joint Information Center was substantially staffed and covered a much broader geographic area for media and community relations engagement. It was from here that BP managed most of their extensive community relations outreach efforts. When the oil began to threaten northwest Florida, an Incident Command Post was located there with on-scene PIOs operating out of Pensacola, Florida. On June 16, Unified Area Command

and the communication operation was moved to a high rise building on Poydras Street in downtown New Orleans. The operational command occupied the 14<sup>th</sup> floor along with the Joint Information Center. The External Affairs operation was on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor. The reason for the separation will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

The major media outlets focused on the Unified Area Command operation in Robert and New Orleans because this is where they could gain primary access to the incident leaders. Initially Unified Command briefings including the federal on-scene coordinator, the National Incident Commander and the Responsible Party Incident Commander were conducted at the Robert facility. By the time the operation moved to New Orleans, there were no longer Unified Command briefings but all briefings were provided by the National Incident Commander, Admiral Thad Allen. Occasionally, particularly when Adm. Allen was away from the Gulf for any length of time, response briefings were provided by Coast Guard admirals serving as Incident Commanders in Houma or Mobile.

Despite Robert and then New Orleans being a primary focus of major outlets, it is fair to say that most of the media engagements took place away from the Unified Command location either on site with response operations or at one of the other JIC locations.



*Brian Sibley, served as PIO representing Unified Command*

The experience of one PIER Systems and O'Brien's contractor is instructive. Brian Sibley is an experienced public relations professional with years of experience, including several years working with the PIER System on behalf of a west coast refinery where he served as a contract Public Information Officer. He was sent to the Mobile, Alabama Joint Information Center supporting media engagements there, then deployed to Pensacola to serve as one of two on-scene PIOs representing Unified Command. While deployed he conducted over 100 broadcast interviews plus numerous other media engagements. His task was simple: facilitate the process of reporters

getting much needed information from Unified Command.

He found that the demand for information to be extremely high. Satellite trucks from all the major broadcast outlets plus local TV stations lined the street near the Incident Command Post and the beach where oil was threatening. "It's hard for me to describe how great the hunger for information is in a situation like this," Sibley said, "The appetite for information is totally insatiable." To meet this demand, Sibley primarily relied on the incident website and social media posts as this was usually the most current source of approved information. He noted: "The information that the press so desperately needed were facts and figures, and because the information changed so quickly it was

helpful for them to have a person that they could program into their cell phones, send text messages to or flag down as he would walk by.” This information was typically usually available to the press via the incident website, as an article on ZDNet reported:

*“Every press release or piece of information that went out from the Incident Command went out simultaneously to the response web site, the corresponding Facebook page and Twitter feed. The web site was a central hub for all information to satisfy the needs of a variety of different types of audiences. Simultaneous publication was critical for accuracy and information consistency because that information changed so much. From a technology perspective, the backend of all of these updates was managed by Public Information Emergency Response (PIER) Systems.”*

However, the on-scene PIOs played a very important role. They provided a person for the stand-up interviews to help fill the almost 24/7 news hole that the spill was creating. They also had access to the Joint Information Center for additional details. When Sibley called into his team members in the Mobile JIC, he typically could get access to details that would be harder for a reporter calling directly into the JIC to access. This responsiveness was noted and appreciated by the reporters. In the ZDNet article, a CBS reporter explained the value of these on-scene PIOs referring to her work with Sibley:

*“Without a PR person at our side I don’t think we would have gotten the answers we needed by our deadline,” said Kelly Cobiella, correspondent for CBS News. “When I had a question about how many boats were skimming on a given day or who was disposing of the oily waste on the beach, it was much more effective to ask the spokesperson for the joint incident command standing right next to me. He could call a command center and actually get through to someone with answers whereas a lot of times we in the media would be passed from one person to the next.”*

In major responses, particularly where the event is geographically dispersed, Field PIOs need to be part of the planning and organization structure. Having identified Field PIO within the JIC is important to enable them to provide value to the reporters on-scene. However, the separation of the JIC from External Affairs, which will be discussed in the next section, led to the problem of uneven access to current information. PIOs and communication managers need to be aware that if some processes that reporters use to gain information are more effective than others, giving them a competitive edge in “scoops,” they will quickly train reporters to use those faster methods. Reporters, of course, are always looking for the inside source that can provide faster, more complete or different information than all other reporters. If this effort is rewarded, the result will be frustration, animosity and a collapse in the established methods of dissemination.

## ***Media Access Policies and Coverage***

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Media access to any major event is a significant issue. Three elements have greatly increased the demand to provide almost unlimited media access: the use of embedded reporters in the Iraq war supported the view of reporters that no area should be off-limits, the use of extremely portable broadcast technology, and the emergence of the Internet with its “citizen journalists” and emphasis on transparency. Policy decisions about media access were under control of Unified Command from the very beginning. BP leadership gave some unfortunate signals

that it did not fully understand the demands and expectations for unfettered media access and transparency, as evidenced in part by its understandable reluctance to provide full public access to the live video feeds from the ROVS operating at the wellhead. In addition, it is likely that some BP staff or contractors in the field did not support the open access policy. Admiral Allen, as National Incident Commander, did fully understand these demands and issued a media access policy that provided clear directives to the External Affairs and Joint Information Center operation. It said simply that the media were to be provided maximum access with minimum delay with the only limitation being safety and security concerns.

Media access to this event was probably unprecedented. Numerous opportunities were provided for “embed” and “embarks” as they were referred to, allowing reporters to accompany response leaders on flights, skimmers, Coast Guard cutters, etc. The Unified Command provided access to reporters through numerous on-scene PIOs as described above and there was a continual succession of press conferences. Nevertheless, there were numerous media reports of access being limited. Efforts were made by numerous reporters to skirt the rules and when prevented from accessing specific areas or vessels based on the Unified Command rules regarding safety and security, the complaints were loud and vigorous.

Despite the numerous messages from Unified Command about the policies and who was determining these policies, reporters continually sought for opportunities to place blame on BP for any limitations. One report, from New Orleans City Business, on May 30 stated:

*“Media organizations say they are being allowed only limited access to areas impacted by the Gulf oil spill through restrictions on plane and boat traffic that are making it difficult to document the worst spill in U.S. history. In at least two cases, a media organization and a seaplane pilot say BP PLC — the company responsible for cleaning up the spill — appeared to have a role in deciding on access.”*

The situation was further confused when the White House took a direct hand in the communication management and one of the JIC spokespeople reported that the White House was controlling access. The truth, of course, was that media access was from the beginning under the control of Unified Command. BP, as the Responsible Party, initially was part of the Unified Command structure, but eventually was removed from any decision-making role in communications as the White House and the Department of Homeland Security took direct supervisory management of communications.

Other media access issues arose relating to wildlife restoration. The on-scene PIOs carried the Unified Command policy statement with them and used it frequently with response personnel to help persuade them to provide media access where requested. To this degree they were invaluable aids in gaining access within the response organization itself. However, the access policy did not extend to wildlife restoration facilities which, while part of the response, were not specifically under the control of Unified Command. In one instance, access was denied by a wildlife restoration facility despite significant efforts on the part of an on-scene PIO.

Media access will continue to be an important issue for all responses in the future. Pressure from traditional and non-traditional journalists will continue. Any effort to limit access, no matter how reasonable, will almost certainly result in media stories that ascribe more sinister motives. That is the reality of communication in a high-profile public event. Crisis communicators must prepare in advance with their response leadership to put in

place the policies and processes to support those policies that will minimize the problems associated with limiting access.

## ***Media Coverage Content, Messaging and Issue Management***

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As noted above, the public seemed overall fairly satisfied with the news coverage of the spill. If you talk to anyone of the hundreds involved in communications during the spill the almost certain reaction about media coverage would be extremely negative. This is understandable to some degree; however, it is important to understand the very significant difference between an insider's perspective on media coverage and that of Joe Citizen sitting on his couch watching the evening news.

A detailed analysis of the more than half million media articles tracked is beyond the scope of this case study. However, a few major themes can be addressed:

- Highly negative reporting
- Reporting techniques—selection of “experts” and interview subjects
- Evolving meta-narratives
- BP Reputation
- Confusion of BP vs government roles
- Political content and control
- Issue identification and reaction

### ***Highly Negative Reporting***

The tonality analysis provided earlier tells the story about the high levels of negative reporting. To a large degree this can be attributed to the nature of the event itself. The spill was a disaster that rivaled or exceeded the impact on human lives of many natural disasters with the important difference that this one was human-caused. While one can express anger and frustration at an “act of God,” an act of human error or incompetence will result in the anger multiplied plus focused on the company and individuals thought to be responsible. The focus of that anger was clearly BP once they identified themselves as liable for the spill and cleanup. The focus was sharpened by the initial efforts of the administration to make certain that the label “Obama’s Katrina” did not stick by making clear their anger with the company and their promises to hold them accountable. The outrage was further strengthened by repeated stories relating to the previous failings of BP with the Texas City refinery accident, the pipeline corrosion issues in Alaska and other evidence of safety and environmental issues. Finally, the sheer duration of the event, the continual flowing of oil into the gulf, the expectations raised by the capping dome, “top kill, ‘junk shot” and other failed attempts to stop the flow all contributed to an exceptional level of highly negative media reports.

Pew Research Center’s detailed analysis of media coverage clearly demonstrated that this event was to a large degree dominated by television coverage, but the coverage varied substantially between the major networks and cable channels:

*“Network television focused largely on the disaster itself, with the strong visuals it provides. Fully 64% of the network airtime was devoted to the cleanup, containment and impact storyline, by far the most of any sector. The overall cable coverage was more mixed, but one key focus was the blame game. Fully 45% of the cable coverage was devoted to examining the government’s role and BP’s role. That represented considerably more coverage than broadcast network news gave to those storylines (28%).”*

### ***Reporting Techniques—use of “experts,” government officials, and victims***

There were certainly instances of the attitude of reporters, broadcasters and publishers directly represented in their reports. Anderson Cooper of CNN, as an example, provided numerous examples of reporting that went far beyond objective observations, clearly demonstrating his own personal outrage against BP in particular. MSNBC’s Keith Olberman complained loudly about BP missing warning signs and accused the company of lying. However, a far more common method was to select people who expressed the very strong opinions that the media outlets wanted to convey. Here there was very little balance. Some of these outspoken commentators were repeatedly, almost incessantly, included in major broadcast reports that were supposedly there to convey information about the response. On CNN Billy Nungesser, the Plaquemines Parish President, gained his far more than fifteen minutes of fame with repeated appearances. The entertainment value was beyond question even if his comments were frequently beyond anything considered responsible. Consider these comments aired on Wolf Blitzer’s “Situation Room” on May 26, referring to the National Incident Commander Admiral Thad Allen: “He’s done absolutely nothing, he’s an embarrassment to this country and he ought to resign.”

Another very angry and outspoken critic of BP and the initial response of the government was political consultant and commentator James Carville. While what is most remembered about Carville’s frequent CNN appearances is the visual image of his red-faced anger, his comments were highly judgmental and inflammatory, as in this quotation from the Huffington Post on May 27:

*“BP is not the equal of the United States government. This president needs to tell BP ‘I’m your daddy, I’m in charge, you’re going to do what we say. You’re a multinational company that is greedy and you may be guilty of criminal activity.’ It’s time that we understand, BP does not wish this thing well. They have been negligent. They need to whip out their checkbook and start moving into action and the president needs to push them.”*

From BP’s perspective, of course, having a very visible and in many quarters, highly respected commentator state unequivocally that “BP does not wish this thing well” is damaging. However, precisely because he was willing to make these kinds of attention-getting statements is why he was a favorite of media outlets during the height of public interest.

Other major outlets found similar people to provoke and entertain. A typical lead news story featured a professor, engineer or vendor disgruntled that their advice, ideas or miracle products were not being used despite their efforts to get the attention of spill leaders. Numerous scientists were consulted to provide conflicting information coming from Unified Command. One of those, Dr. George Crozier who specializes in the ecology of the Gulf of Mexico, provided dire predictions of the impact of the spill on the ecosystem of the Gulf. In early August, after the flow had been stopped and it was reported that most of the oil had disappeared or been removed,

he was one who lamented the role he played in creating the doomsday scenarios so desired by the media. On August 13 he was quoted on Chattanooga.com:

*“This is not and never was the death of the Gulf of Mexico,” Crozier said of the spill, estimated at 4.9 million barrels. “That’s a simple fact. And I have to admit that in the initial stages of this I and everybody else contributed to the problem. We created the disaster beyond the bounds that it should have been articulated. Hindsight is as cheap as dirt.”*

Politicians and elected officials are favorite sources of comment from the media who are on-scene and required to come up with new material continually. For politicians an event like this provides an opportunity to secure airtime, to demonstrate their concern for the public interest, and to translate public outrage into new legislation and regulation. A number of names emerged as “leaders” in feeding the outrage and in turn being fed by it. Representative Ed Markey of Massachusetts was particularly aggressive in adding to the perception of BP’s evils and took a lead role in fighting for and securing public access to the live video feeds. Conversely, Joe Barton from Texas was severely chastised for his apology to BP and for calling the \$20 billion escrow fund secured by the president as a “shakedown.”

There is no question of the symbiotic relationship between media outlets needing interviews and politicians needing airtime and a popular cause. This is one of the essential elements of major crises such as this. This event may take this mixing of negative media coverage, political posturing and crisis management to new levels. This is evident by the story on the “The Hill’s Blog Briefing Room” by Michael O’Brien on August 16 when he reported: “Democrats added five top Senate targets to their list of so-called ‘BP Republicans,’ a group Democrats charge with favoring oil companies’ business interests.” In this situation, any politician seen to be favoring or even neutral to a company that has been the subject of such outrage, is at political risk.

### ***Evolving meta-narratives***

We like to think that in a highly competitive media environment with strong competition, a variety of opinions, viewpoints and information will emerge. It is quite surprising to see the opposite occurring in an event like this. As we look back on major events with heavy media coverage it is quite easy to see the major themes or “meta-narratives” that emerged. In the case of the USAir flight ditching the Hudson River, the overarching story was of the heroic skill of the pilot. In the case of Toyota’s recall issues, it was their lax response to emerging safety problems; in the case of Hurricane Katrina it was the cataclysmic failure of FEMA and the Bush administration to adequately respond to the crisis. In all these situations, the reality is far more nuanced and complicated than can be captured in a single, overriding narrative. For example, major media outlets never did cover the story from the perspective that prior to Katrina, FEMA was never considered a response organization, but instead a means by which the federal government would funnel federal tax dollars in support of the local, state and regional response organizations. The reality simply did not conform to the story that resonated with the public and provided an endless series of attention-getting headlines.

The Deepwater Horizon event illustrates this herd instinct of major media both in the meta-narrative that evolved from the event as a whole, and in the smaller narratives that defined phases in the media coverage. It seems clear that the overall story of the spill is related to the perception of BP’s incompetence and failings as a company.

This was a story detailed early in the response as its history of events was repeated, then built on by the reaction of administration officials with comments such as those of Secretary Salazar who promised to put his “boot on the neck” of the company. President Obama added to this on June 7th with his comment “...so I know whose ass to kick”. But the supposed miscues of then CEO Tony Hayward were used by most media reports and analysts as the clearest evidence of the company’s incompetence, lack of seriousness regarding the spill, and failures in corporate culture.

But smaller narratives emerged on a frequent basis. This is of course to be expected, but what is surprising is the degree to which the herd instinct operates among the major outlets. Regardless of the issue, it seemed that most reporters and editors followed largely the same line. While it may appear that the media coverage is merely reflecting the news of the day, the lack of diversity in the coverage on major issues is somewhat surprising.

For example, when BP CEO Tony Hayward and Chairman Carl-Hendric Svanberg faced a congressional hearing, the news coverage was universally focused on the heavy grilling the executives received at the hands of Rep. Waxman and others. For those of us responding to inquiries and tracking social media conversations, we saw a very substantial increase in positive support for BP immediately following those hearings. The percentage of negative comments to positive comments went down after that and never fully regained the high percentage the negatives had prior to this. In other words, the hearing produced a reaction against Congressional leaders and in favor of BP that would have been obvious to any reporter tracking public sentiment. But this fact was never covered and instead, when the apology from Rep. Barton came reflecting the sentiment of many observers of the hearing, he was solidly criticized. Media coverage never wavered from the basic position of congressional white hats vs. BP black hats in this event.

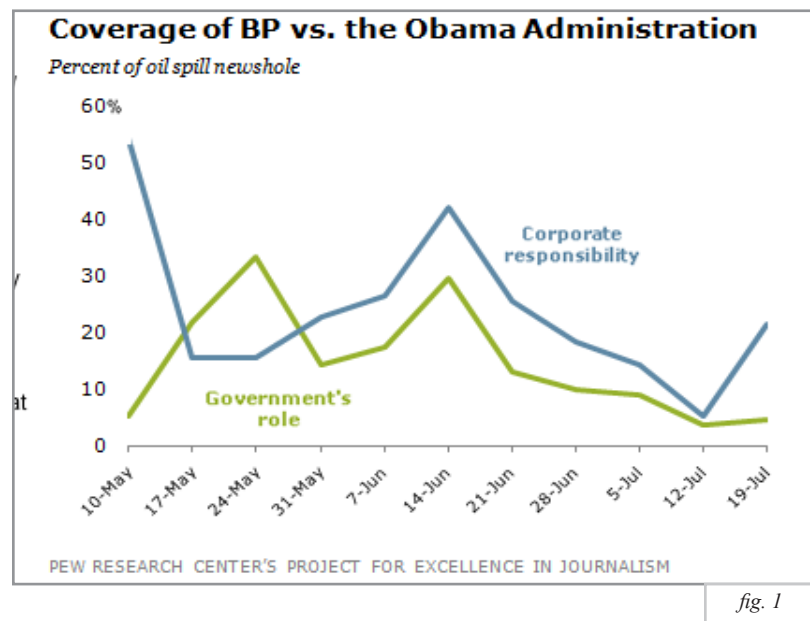
The issue of the use of dispersants is another example of highly consistent media coverage on a complex topic. The meta-narrative was clearly that BP was indiscriminately using a toxic material that was almost certainly causing more harm than it was preventing. Part of that narrative was that the EPA and the government were fighting BP’s use of it but BP was ignoring their orders. In one of the more bizarre stories of this event, on May 20 Unified Command issued a press release with the headline: “EPA: BP must use less toxic dispersant.” The lead paragraph of this release states: “Today, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued a directive requiring BP to identify and use a less toxic and more effective dispersant from the list of EPA authorized dispersants.” However, the last paragraph of this release states:

*“On May 15 EPA and the U.S. Coast Guard authorized BP to use dispersants underwater at the source of the Deepwater Horizon leak. As the dispersant is used underwater, BP is required to do constant, scientifically rigorous monitoring so EPA scientists may determine the dispersants’ effectiveness and impact on the environment, water and air quality, and human health. EPA is posting the information BP collects during the monitoring to ensure the public has access to this data.”*

Those knowledgeable about the Incident Command System were very aware that from the moment Unified Command was implemented in the first hours of the response all decisions about response methods, including the use of dispersants, were made by Unified Command. The EPA was one of many federal agencies working directly with Unified Command and had full authority under the US Coast Guard as the Federal On-Scene Coordinator and the National Incident Commander to direct the use of dispersants including the type of dispersants used. The press

release issued was meant to convey a political message that the government through the EPA did not approve of the use of dispersants even while they were in full control of its use. This did not escape the attention of all reporters as the first question posed to President Obama at this press conference on May 26 when he announced that the federal government had been in charge of the response all along, was if that was true and the EPA was directing use of dispersants, why did they issue the letter on May 24? However, no media outlet followed up on this issue, which clearly pointed to the gap between the political messages and the reality of the response.

The most significant meta-narrative of this event was the result of the “blame game” as Pew Research references it. In the era of infotainment it is natural to cast most stories with heroes and villains, black hats and white hats, or as Pew describes, antagonists and protagonists. Each story, like all drama or effective story telling, is essentially about a conflict between good and evil. Those observing the coverage would have little difficulty in identifying the “black hat”: BP. The politics of such an event, particularly post-Katrina when the blame for an ineffective response was ultimately placed on President Bush, is certain to involve political opportunism. Political adversaries will rush to the opportunity to place blame on their opponents, and that certainly played out in much of the media coverage.



The accompanying chart shows the variation between President Obama and BP in the news coverage related to the “blame game.” While it varied to some degree, it is clear that overall the burden of the black hat fell primarily on BP vs. the president. This is consistent with public opinion as the event winds down, with BP seen as far more responsible for the damage than the president or the government. It is interesting however, that the initial response of the administration was to separate the government as much as possible from BP in the

response, including removing all agency logos from the deepwaterhorizonresponse.com website and making clear this was the “BP oil spill”. Clearly, this attempt to avoid the “Obama’s Katrina” label was ineffective as media and public calls for federal leadership grew from early to late May. This can clearly be seen in the chart above where blame on BP lessened and increased on the government. It had already begun to change when President Obama made this announcement at the May 27 press conference:

*“The American people should know that from the moment this disaster began, the federal government has been in charge of the response effort. As far as I’m concerned, BP is responsible for this horrific disaster, and we will hold them fully accountable on behalf of the United States as well as the people and communities victimized by this tragedy. We will demand that they pay every dime they owe for the damage*

*they've done and the painful losses that they've caused. And we will continue to take full advantage of the unique technology and expertise they have to help stop this leak. But make no mistake: BP is operating at our direction. Every key decision and action they take must be approved by us in advance."*

Regarding antagonists and protagonists, the Pew study makes a point of noting that while two clear antagonists vied for public and media blame, no clear protagonists emerged. Congressman Ed Markey may be the closest as the Pew report states: "As chairman of the Energy and Environment Subcommittee, which probed the disaster, Markey became a loud voice in the chorus of BP critics. But he never really emerged above the cacophony of Capitol Hill anger aimed at the oil company." Others who may qualify include Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal who was seen as a staunch critic of the White House. The already mentioned Billy Nungesser who the Pew report described as "ubiquitous" and the New York Times described as "the go to guy for the news media." It is reasonable to ask, why the news media would find such an outspoken, harsh critic of everyone involved in the response so valuable? The answer cannot possibly be because of his ability to enlighten and educate the public about the event. The only possible answer can be because of the entertainment value and the role he played in carrying the meta-narrative the news editors and producers had decided on.

### ***BP Reputation***

Public relations experts, crisis management pundits and journalists alike are engaged in an analysis of the cataclysmic collapse of BP's reputation in this event. On August 21 the New York Times ran an article titled: "In Case of Emergency: What Not To Do." On July 25, the Washington Post ran an article titled: "How crisis pr hasn't kept up with the turbulent times." It may seem ironic that the collapse of reputation as we have documented here has much to do with the way the media treats events such as this with "the blame game" and finding voices who will rant and contradict information coming from the responders, then stand back and wonder what happened to a much vaunted reputation. But the question remains, given the event and the coverage could BP's reputation have been better protected?

There were three factors beyond the control of the public affairs team and communicators that greatly contributed to BP's reputation loss. One, is the inherent mistrust and animosity to Big Oil and in this case, particularly Big Foreign Oil. Two, is the unfortunate series of high profile events involving BP that preceded this event. Three, was the fact that BP was unable to control the spill, particularly since expectations were high regarding the early, failed attempts.

Despite these obvious and strong factors, the focus on reputation damage falls on former CEO Tony Hayward. It was the second time in recent memory BP sent a heavily accented CEO to address American audiences after a major disaster. It is clear from past events that the CEO is the visible representation of the company and it is through his or her actions that the public judges the character of the organization. It may be argued that the media was patently unfair to Mr. Hayward, that no CEO could possibly survive when the company they represent seems helpless to stop a catastrophe which the entire world is witnessing, that his British accent and mannerisms made him an ineffective spokesperson from the beginning and that in the political/media environment of this event there is nothing that he could have done to change the media coverage and public perception. All of this may be true, but the fact remains that Mr. Hayward became the lightning rod for public, media and political recriminations. Given the almost impossible situation he found himself in, it seems inevitable given the gaffes that have been widely

discussed, that he could not survive as CEO. The question is could BP's reputation been improved with a much quicker change in CEOs? The announcement of Robert Dudley as the replacement for Mr. Hayward was met with some degree of relief and a remarkably small level of criticism. This could easily be due to the timing in which the public outrage and media blame game had largely run its course. In that view the timing was appropriate and wise.

A key principle of crisis communication is that credibility is all a company or organization really has when fighting for its future and reputation. When credibility is lost and not recovered, the situation is largely hopeless from a communication standpoint. Unfortunately, BP allowed its credibility to dissipate and eventually be lost and from that position the road back to respect will be long and difficult indeed. There are four things that could have changed this to some degree—all of which are important lessons to be applied to other organizations in preparing for large-scale events:

- **Limited access to the CEO** – Mr. Hayward was followed by the media on almost a continual basis, not allowing sufficient rest and exposing himself to the casual comment that could be damaging. His time should have been limited and he should have limited his comments to the prepared talking points to avoid gaffes.
- **Primary spokesperson replacement sooner** – when it was clear that he was the focal point of outrage, particularly after the yacht race mistake, a replacement should have been named. This need not have been the CEO and could have been an independent, highly respected person to serve as ombudsman for the public, reporting objectively on BP's actions, similar to the roles of Paul Volcker with Arthur Andersen and George Mitchell with the baseball commission.
- **Aggressive communication regarding Unified Command and roles** – there was and remains much confusion about the role, responsibility and rights of the responsible party in a response under OPA 90. It would have been much to BP's advantage to maintain a collaborative stance and communicate far more aggressively about the law and the 20 year practice of coordinated response and communication.
- **Aggressive rumor management operation** – the negative reporting, misinformation and the use of instant-celebrity BP attackers all went unchallenged. Clearly BP felt that they could not take an aggressive tone or vigorously rebut the attacks as long as the oil was spilling, but this reticence meant that the attacks and misinformation went unchallenged and uncorrected. Perhaps because the outrage was directed at BP and not Unified Command, the External Affairs operation was also reticent to point to errors and misleading reporting.

### ***Political Messaging***

This was addressed to some degree in the discussion on meta-narratives and will be explored further in analyzing the changing structure of the communications response. But the way in which the response organization's communication operation was absorbed into the White House's communication operation is in many ways the most surprising, significant and potentially concerning outcome of this response.

A review of the [deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://deepwaterhorizonresponse.com) website reveals that through the end of August over 600 documents were published that included the reference to “The On-going Administration-Wide Response to Deepwater Horizon BP Oil Spill.” The major releases after May 27 carried that term as the title. These documents provided some operational response information, but they were heavily weighted toward administration activities, particularly reports of planned or past visits by senior administration officials to the Gulf. This would only seem highly unusual to the oil industry and lead agencies involved in oil spill response following the ExxonValdez accident and the passage of the Oil Pollution Act of 1990. What began as a typical, albeit exceptionally large-scale response, turned into something quite different, with long-term consequences for oil spills and other emergency responses for many years to come.

PIER has been involved in a large number of drills and actual events involving the oil industry and the leading government federal and state response agencies. In every case where we were involved, an incident specific PIER website was used as the Joint Information Center website and the agencies involved required that their agency logos be included on the homepage of the site. In the case of the near capsizing of the drilling rig called Thunder Horse during Hurricane Dennis early in 2005, a BP crisis site was initially launched as BP was the operator for this rig. When Unified Command was formed, BP invited the Coast Guard and other agencies to participate on their PIER site and they agreed because of their experience as PIER users and with the full knowledge that Unified Command would have full control of the website. In making it a JIC site, the logos of the Coast Guard, Minerals Management Service and other agencies participating were added to the homepage.

That is why the results of Secretary Napolitano’s involvement beginning May 1st visit to Unified Command on May 2nd were such a surprise to those accustomed to traditional JIC processes. The [deepwaterhorizonresponse.com](http://deepwaterhorizonresponse.com) website was completely changed. The name of the event was changed from the Deepwater Horizon Incident to “BP Oil Spill.” And all agencies logos were stripped off the site. The naming issue itself is very significant because under ICS naming an incident is an important step of Unified Command and the consistent use of that name is strictly enforced. Using multiple names for the same incident would engender confusion in public and internal response communication. Confusion was already injected with the initial name of “Transocean” based on the owner of the rig, then changed to “Deepwater Horizon”. Clearly there was intent to generalize it to the rig name versus any company name at this stage. Perhaps because of understandable uncertainty early on as to the final designation of the responsible party. The removal of the agency logos was even more surprising primarily because of the precedent of using agency logos on Joint Information Center sites. Most agency leaders were adamant in making certain their agencies were well represented on any response where they participated as a member of Unified Command. Apparently a discussion took place within Unified Command about the naming issue because within approximately two hours of the name change on the website, the Deepwater Horizon name reappeared. However, the BP Oil Spill remained as well and from that time official spill communications varied in name use but with the administration showing a clear preference to referring to it as “the BP Oil Spill.”

This seemingly minor change in name and removal of logos signaled the first political overlay on the spill communications. Prior to this time, the communication function followed typical ICS and JIC processes and organization. While it took considerable time for the transition to be made, the change to overt White House control and messaging was steadily accomplished past this date. However, there were some rather sharp changes in White House political strategy as the spill continued and media and public pressure on the government increased.

Those changed can be best seen as three different phases:

**Phase 1: April 21 – May 2 Typical Unified Command and JIC Information.**

Communication leaders from the US Coast Guard and BP collaborated on developing, approving and disseminating information about the event and the response using processes well-practiced over 20 years in annual drills as well as other spill events large and small.

**Phase 2: (May 1 – May 27) Administration focuses attention on BP as their spill and their response in effort to minimize damage to the administration.**

The change in name and removal of logos was one indication of the administration's strategy of making certain this was "BP's spill" and not the government's. Initially the tone was consistent with an ICS collaborative response as articulated by John Brennan, Assistant to the President and Deputy National Security Adviser for Homeland Security and Counterterrorism, at the May 1 press conference when Admiral Allen was introduced as the National Incident Commander. Mr. Brennan, referring to Admiral Allen's priorities:

*"One is to make sure that this an integrated effort. Clearly the federal government as a whole needs to be working with BP, that has responsibility as far as the cleanup is concerned, but also make sure that the federal government, BP is working very closely with the state and local communities that are there... BP also I think has been rather forward leaning as far as their commitment to the local communities to hire, employ and train the local citizens for this cleanup, so that commitment is strong. The infrastructure is being put in place both in terms of BP as well as the federal government. And with the JIC and others there, the appropriate points of contact are being made available to the state and local communities, as well as to the citizens."*

However, on May 2, Department of Interior Secretary Ken Salazar whose agency Minerals Management Services was already under severe attack, expressed the administration's intent in more strident tones. On CNN's "State of the Union" Secretary Salazar stated: "Our job basically is to keep the boot on the neck of British Petroleum to carry out the responsibilities they have both under the law and contractually to move forward and stop this spill."

This basic strategy of focusing attention on BP by making certain the public understood it was BP's spill and BP's responsibility to clean it up and pay for it was maintained until May 27. It is a bit of a curiosity that the administration seemed intent on referring to the company as British Petroleum even though the company had formally changed its name from British Petroleum to BP in 2001. Speculation, certainly in the UK, centered on the assumption that the intent was to emphasize that the company was foreign owned.

**Phase 3: May 27 "Federal government is in charge"**

President Obama held a press conference on May 27 where he announced that the federal government was in charge all along. At about this same time, the BP communication leaders who had been part of the Unified Command JIC leadership were distanced from the leadership. Prior to this, following standard JIC and Unified Command procedures, command representatives from all parties in Unified Command stood together at a Unified Command press briefing. The standard press briefing led by Rear Adm. Mary Landry, the Federal On-Scene

Coordinator, always included a BP Incident Commander, usually Doug Suttles, to provide the details of the efforts to stop the spill and minimize damage from the oil in the gulf. Even though Allen was appointed National Incident Commander on May 1, the traditional Unified Command press conferences with multiple response leaders participating continued throughout May until a few days past the president's press conference.

On June 1 a dramatic shift was evident as Admiral Allen stood alone at the podium and announced: "So, the goal is to have me speak to you on a daily basis, depending on where I'm at." The change was not just to eliminate BP from any presence in the leadership of communications and at the podium, but it was also to put an end to the various agency heads speaking on behalf of the administration. Clearly, a decision was made following the May 27 announcement that the federal government was completely and incontrovertibly in charge and that there would only be one spokesperson for the entire government at the response other than the president, and that spokesperson would be Admiral Allen.

A review of the Pew Research analysis of the media "blame game" content provides an important clue to this very significant change. On May 10 the focus of coverage relating to blame was clearly on BP. One week later, the government's role surpassed that of BP until May 24 when it began to decline. During this time, most TV coverage, particularly cable TV, was focusing on the question of who should manage the response? The administration's answer had been: it's BP's spill, they run it with our "boot to their neck." But it was clear from the coverage that this strategy was failing as a means of inoculating the administration against the "Obama's Katrina" charge. Hence the dramatic shift in strategy and messaging. A second but perhaps equally important reason was the fact that on May 29 BP's Doug Suttles announced that the much-anticipated "top kill" method of stopping the spill had failed. There is reason to believe that if this had succeeded, the change that was already being put in place would have moderated. But the combination of the increasing media and public pressure with BP's very visible failure resulted in the administration taking a much firmer hand in the communication activities.

In this phase, communication strategy clearly focused on two elements. One, was to communicate the nearly continuous stream of major administration officials to the Gulf. The White House was clearly aware that any indication that they were not deeply and personally engaged in the response would lead to heavy criticism. Secondly, any response activity that was conducted, particularly anything that could be seen as a positive, was given an administration overlay. In other words all response activities from the claims process, to the use of dispersants, to very specific actions relating to capping the well and removing the damaged Blowout Preventer, were communicated as being mandated or directed by the administration. Once the administration sent the message that they were in charge, the administration's criticism of BP about the claims process was changed to a message emphasizing that BP was being directed by the administration to improve its claim process until finally on August 23, the administration's appointed claims czar Kenneth Feinberg assumed full control of the claims process using the \$20 billion escrow fund BP committed. Once Admiral Allen stood alone at the podium on June 1, it was communicated that every action BP took was under the explicit instructions or direction of the administration through the National Incident Commander. The briefing on September 3 announcing the successful removal of the Blowout Preventer (BOP) provides an example of the kind of messaging employed:

*"Under the direction of the federal science team and U.S. government engineers, BP has lifted the damaged Blow Out Preventer (BOP) from its position atop the cemented Macondo 252 well. We will continue to closely monitor progress as the BOP, which along with the latching device weighs approximately one million pounds, is lifted to the surface in the next 24-36 hours. This procedure was undertaken in*

*accordance with specific conditions I set forth last week in a directive authorizing the capping stack removal, which was completed yesterday, and BOP replacement. BP will continue to follow these required conditions during the lifting of the damaged BOP and as the device is replaced. I will continue to provide updates as necessary.”*

While behind the scenes, the actual operation more closely resembled a traditional Incident Command System response with the Responsible Party Incident Commander taking a lead role in planning and managing response operations, the National Incident Commander role in this situation was used to inoculate the administration from response disappointments while maximizing administration credit for any successes at the expense of the responsible party. Those with experience in previous large oil industry events where collaboration and cooperation were maintained as primary values would find this kind of political messaging unusual and disturbing.

## Section Three: Organization and Structure

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Well over 60,000 individuals participated in the response to the Gulf spill. At the peak of activities, from mid-June to mid-July when the well was capped, approximately 45,000 responders were working on the event. Emergency response management is more complex than traditional organization management for two important reasons: the urgency of the task at hand and the fact that people responding come from many different companies and agencies, with varying degrees of experience and training and at many different levels of seniority and positions within their own organizations. The challenge of organizing, managing and tracking the diverse people and support resources involved is immense.

This study focuses on the communication operation, not the operational response. However, the two are closely linked in structure and organization by federal regulations and standard practices relating to oil spill response, and by newer requirements issued by the Department of Homeland Security for coordinating major incidents when multiple agencies are involved. The questions raised here relate to the regulations and standard practices and how they were or were not implemented for media and public communication in this response. Since many major private companies as well as jurisdictions across the country prepare for emergencies using national guidelines and practices, the way those guidelines were implemented in this major event will determine organization structure and effectiveness in future events.

### *Section Three Summary*

*The US government, as a result of experience with large-scale events including ExxonValdez , 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina has issued a number of laws and regulations determining how multi-agency response management is to be handled. However, these laws and regulations are inconsistent and contradictory, particularly with regard to how public communication is handled. The initial response leaders managed public information following the National Contingency Plan and the National Response Team's Joint Information Center Model which has been the standard for oil spill response since the ExxonValdez accident. But, with the direct involvement of the administration through the Department of Homeland Security, the National Contingency Plan procedures were replaced with those more closely resembling the External Affairs function identified in the National Response Framework. The result was a very significant change from a collaborative and cooperative response focused on incident information to highly disciplined information management focused on the administration's communication concerns. The implications for both national emergency response and public/private coordinated response are identified.*

## *Mandated Emergency Response Organization Structures*

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### *ICS and the Joint Information Center*

Responders initially called to this event on April 20 were exceptionally well practiced in the federally-required management structures used for oil spills. This is a legacy of the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 and the ExxonValdez accident from which this legislation issued. The US Coast Guard, which has jurisdiction over all spills involving navigable waters, and BP as one of the largest oil companies operating in the US, had been working together for twenty years in mandated drills and exercises. The Oil Pollution Act of 1990 (OPA 90) and the modifications to the National Contingency Plan coming out of OPA 90 require annual oil spill drills under the supervision of the Coast Guard or EPA and state level response agencies. “Worst-case scenario” drills are conducted every three years as well as Spills of National Significance exercises or SONS, involving typically multiple states and regions. In addition, the Department of Interior’s Minerals Management Service (MMS), now the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management, Regulation and Enforcement (BOEMRE), required frequent surprise drills for companies operating in the Gulf of Mexico. All of these mock spill exercises followed a very specific protocol for organizing the rapid build-up of responders, equipment and supplies needed to deal quickly and effectively with oil spills. That system is called ICS, or the Incident Command System.

The Incident Command System was developed following a devastating wildfire in Southern California in 1970 that cost 16 lives and 700 structures. The lack of coordination and communication between the different fire services responding resulted in Congress mandating the US Forest Service develop a system that would improve multi-agency coordination and allow for effective deployment of resources in a multiple-fire situation. The problem that needed to be solved is relatively easy to understand. Responders would arrive on-scene from many different agencies, often with agency pride foremost. They carry with them ranks, seniority and individual ways of communicating and managing activities. A fire captain may be assigned a role of directing operations in a certain sector when a battalion chief from another agency arrives. Issues of seniority, rank, experience and vastly different methods of approaching the task at hand can quickly interfere with the urgent work that needs to be done. Orders cannot be effectively carried out when new people to the response arrive and say, in effect, “you’re not my boss.”

ICS eliminated the organization and communication confusion by putting in place a military-style, highly efficient management system. It is characterized by a single Command authority which has complete responsibility and authority over all response activities including public communication. Response management is divided into five key areas: Command, Operations, Planning, Logistics, Finance and Administration. Public information management is one of three Command support functions: Information, Safety and Liaison. This system proved to significantly improve response effectiveness when multiple agencies were involved in attacking the same or coordinated events. Consequently, when President Bush directed the Department of Homeland Security through Homeland Security Presidential Directive-5 to create a national system for incident management, Secretary Ridge on March 1, 2004 issued the National Incident Management System (NIMS) that incorporated ICS at its core. This was done based in part on the recommendations of the “9/11 Commission” which recommended national adoption of ICS. The FEMA website (<http://www.fema.gov/emergency/nims/IncidentCommandSystem.shtm#item1>) makes very clear the link between ICS and NIMS: “To be NIMS compliant, you need to use the Incident Command System (ICS) structure described in the current version of NIMS.”

As a result of this event the term “Unified Area Command” became common as the authority managing the response. NIMS and ICS identify the formation of Unified Command when there are different agencies or response partners with regulatory authority over the event. Each authorized agency provides a “Coordinator” as a member of Unified Command. OPA 90 provides that the Responsible Party, the company held liable for spill costs, is a member of Unified Command. That person is identified as the “Responsible Party Incident Commander” (RPIC) while the lead federal official is the “Federal On-Scene Coordinator” and lead for the state response agency is the “State On-Scene Coordinator.” As this system has been practiced for twenty years, the Incident Commander is always the lead representative of the Responsible Party and the role of the government officials is to provide direct oversight. Ultimate protection of public interest has been provided by the process of “federalizing” which means that should the Federal On-Scene Coordinator (FOSC) find the response as directed by the RPIC to be unacceptable and without hope of improvement, the FOSC has the option of taking full and direct control, typically by eliminating the RP from any meaningful role in the response management.

Prior to its adoption as the unified national system, the Coast Guard had fully integrated ICS into oil spill response. One of the key provisions of the National Contingency Plan (NCP) was the formation of the National Response Team (NRT). In 1994 the National Contingency Plan was updated with significant changes coming as a result of OPA 90. One of those changes relevant to the Gulf Spill was the identification of presidential authority in responding to spills:

*“These changes increase Presidential authority to direct cleanup of oil spills and hazardous substance releases and augment preparedness and planning activities on the part of the federal government, as well as vessel and facility owners and operators.”*

Source: [http://www.epa.gov/oem/content/frps/09\\_94\\_fulltext.htm](http://www.epa.gov/oem/content/frps/09_94_fulltext.htm)

Another significant addition to the National Response Plan was regarding public affairs and community relations:

*EPA has revised Sec. 300.155(a) to state that the OSC/RPM [On-Scene Coordinator and Responsible Party Management—author’s clarification] should coordinate with available public affairs/community relations resources to ensure that all appropriate interests are considered by establishing, as appropriate, an on-scene Joint Information Center bringing together resources from federal and state agencies and the responsible party. Experience shows that there are some situations when a Joint Information Center is essential to provide adequate coordination of information to the public from federal and state authorities during an event. In other response actions, a less formal mechanism may be adequate. In the final analysis, it is within the OSC’s discretion to determine whether to establish a Joint Information Center during an event.*

The Joint Information Center concept was not addressed in ICS which limited its directives on public information to the identification of an Information Officer as one of three members of the Command staff. Consequently different organization structures were used until in January, 2000 several experienced Coast Guard Public Affairs Officers, in coordination with other public affairs leaders from the federal agencies included in the National Response Team, issued the NRT Joint Information Center Model. This document detailed the organization structure of a Joint Information Center establishing roles and job descriptions and processes for interacting with

Command to help insure timely, accurate release of information about the response. This structure was updated with changes in technology and news environment in the October 2009 edition of the Joint Information Center Model issued by the National Response Team.

As with the Unified Command structure discussed above, the PIO position was typically filled by an experienced public relations professional employed by or contracted by the Responsible Party. Other lead positions in the JIC were held by public affairs professionals from the responding agencies. Government oversight was maintained over all public communication through the requirement of approval by Unified Command.

It is this model that was implemented immediately upon the formation of ICS and Unified Command in the Deepwater Horizon event. And it is this model that has been consistently used by the US Coast Guard, EPA, and all state agencies in practicing oil spill responses in the frequent drills as well as in responding to actual oil spill and other events in the oil industry. The fact that many of the response leaders arriving in the Gulf in the first week of the spill knew each other from drills and exercises, shared training on ICS and JIC procedures and understood the primary roles and organization structure contributed greatly to quickly building an effective response organization in an atmosphere of trust and mutual commitment to the enormous task at hand.

The initial response was based on the National Contingency Plan and Area Contingency Plans coming out of OPA 90. However, the Joint Information Center structure that evolved out of these plans was very significantly modified as the response evolved, in part based on implementation of the External Affairs support function of the National Response Framework. The inconsistencies and contradictions between these two core plans, combined with other critical factors, provided the greatest challenges to the effective management of public information during the Deepwater Horizon event.

### *National Response Framework (NRF) and ESF #15*

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The National Response Framework initially was issued as the National Response Plan by the Department of Homeland Security on October 10, 2003 as a result of HSPD-5. This was followed in March 2004, with the issuance of the National Incident Management System (NIMS) discussed above. However, the nation's experience with Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, led to legislation titled the "Post-Katrina Emergency Management Reform Act of 2006." This legislation identified issues with the National Response Plan, which was subsequently modified and re-issued in March 2008 as the National Response Framework.

The relevant issue for this study is the introduction in this document of ESF #15 addressing External Affairs.

The National Response Framework currently includes fifteen Emergency Support Functions or Annexes. These are designed as flexible additions to the core document addressing specific organization structures and actions relating to different but vital response activities. For example, ESF #1 addresses transportation including mass evacuations, ESF #4 addresses fire fighting and ESF #13 Public Safety and Security. ESF #15 addresses External Affairs.

The approach to public information management under ESF #15 is very different from that used in the National Contingency Plan—the National Response Team’s Joint Information Center model. The differences are not incidental and the different structures resulted in substantial changes in how public information was managed, the efficiency of operation, the quality of the information itself, and the resulting media coverage and public opinion.

### ***Differences between the National Response Team JIC Model and the National Response Framework ESF #15 External Affairs Annex***

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In simplest terms the primary difference between the two structures for managing public and stakeholder information in a major response is bottom-up communication management versus top-down communication management. The history and evolution of the two structures is informative in understanding this critical difference.

The JIC Model, as mentioned above, was developed initially by several Coast Guard Public Affairs Officers with deep experience in marine responses, frequently involving private companies as “responsible parties.” The US Coast Guard has a deep and honored tradition of excellence in public information management with a core philosophy of “being the first and best source” of information about events where they are responding. As a taxpayer supported public response agency, they are typically in the role of reporting on problems caused by others—in the case of oil spills it is almost always someone else’s fault. Their focus, represented clearly in the JIC Model, is to maintain close connection with the response organization to gather information about the event and the response, and structure a streamlined, efficient organization to develop the raw information into releasable forms, secure necessary Command approvals, and distribute it to the media, stakeholders and the interested public. It was this history and this approach that made a strong fit between the Coast Guard and PIER which emphasized efficient information gathering, processing, release and wide distribution to multiple audiences.

This process, in structure and in practice, emphasized identifying all relevant response information and the fastest and broadest distribution. Because the JIC consisted of multiple response agencies and typically a private company as the “Responsible Party” any effort to assign blame, to point fingers, to speculate prematurely on causes, to give benefit to one partner at the expense of the other was discouraged. All those involved in preparing the information for release recognized that approval on all major items was contingent on all members of Unified Command approving the information. If a draft was tilted in any one direction, it was understood that a debate would likely occur in the Command conference room that would almost certainly delay the release of important information. Thus, both by intention and actual practice, response information tended to be a “just the facts” exercise with a minimum of message strategy, positioning, or “spin.” The information released was “bottom-up” meaning that the facts originated at the scene of the event and the process was designed to facilitating those facts being distributed to the public with a minimum of bureaucracy and delay.

ESF #15’s history is very different. The National Response Framework overall was driven first of all by 9/11 rather than the ExxonValdez. As the Congressional Research Service report on November 2008 stated (p. 16): “All of the NRF’s Incident Annexes are oriented toward terrorism.” However, the External Affairs Annex, ESF

#15, was written after Hurricane Katrina and it is quite clear that its very different structure was intended primarily to protect the Department of Homeland Security and the President from the kind of intense criticism leveled at the Bush administration and FEMA by the press during the August 2005 disaster.

A review of the reporting structure is most instructive. Under the NRT model the lines of authority point directly to Command through the Public Information Officer who is a member of the Command staff. There are at most three steps between the leaders of the JIC functional units, the Assistant Public Information Officers, and Command. (In reality the APIOs typically report directly to the PIO shortening the actual chain of command.) Under ESF #15, there are five levels of authority and in reality, as was seen in Deepwater Horizon, six and more because the Secretary reports to the President through White House staff. There are two core concepts of NIMS violated in the ESF #15 structure: the complete authority of Command over the response including public information, and limited span of control -- a management principle embedded in ICS which limits each supervisor to no more than five direct reports. In ESF #15, six different Assistant EA Officers report to one person up through a direct chain of superiors.

While the differences between these two structures are many and significant, for the purpose of this study we'll focus on three of the most relevant differences: information gathering and production, information approvals and the Joint Information Center or JIC.

### ***Information Gathering and Production—Plans and Reality***

The first functional unit of the JIC model is the Information Gathering unit with specific roles and plans for integration with the response organization to insure best possible access to relevant response information. The “raw” information from the response organization, typically the Situation Status Unit within the Planning Section, is passed to the unit designed to convert that unapproved information in releasable forms.

The task of preparing information for release under ESF #15 falls to the Planning and Products unit. The manual describes the function of the role this way:

*“Central coordination and unity of effort in development of all communications strategy and materials within ESF #15 and the JFO are critical. To this end, a new ESF #15 component, Planning and Products, is established to coordinate and develop all communications plans and materials. This central focus provides greater strategic coordination and enhanced messaging efficiency.”*

The detailed description of the role includes: “Through unity of effort, centrally directs and develops all messaging from the JFO (Joint Field Office).” The specific instructions to the Strategy and Messaging Unit is: “Strategy and Messaging acquires information, assesses communications requirements within the incident response, incorporates FCO and JFO tasking, and develops and/or updates strategic communications plans.”

It is significant that while the JIC model discusses “information” and “fact gathering,” ESF #15 emphasizes messaging and strategy. The process of gathering relevant information is almost lost in the much more significant concern of developing strategy and appropriate messaging. Again, these distinctions played out directly

in the public information in the Gulf Spill as the administration through the Department of Homeland Security assumed direct control of communications through the implementation of ESF #15.

In the Deepwater Horizon event the information gathering was problematic after transitioning from the traditional JIC model to a hybrid ESF #15 structure. This was due in large part to the lack of familiarity with the major participants in the ESF structure as well as the lack of clarity in the structure itself regarding information gathering. As mentioned earlier, information became known in the External Affairs operation through representatives from various agencies who maintained direct and independent contact with their counterparts in the field or in the Unified Area Command operation center. From there it was a process of collecting these bits of pieces from the representatives and developing both immediate answers to pressing questions as well as formal information releases.

### ***Information Approvals—Plans and Reality***

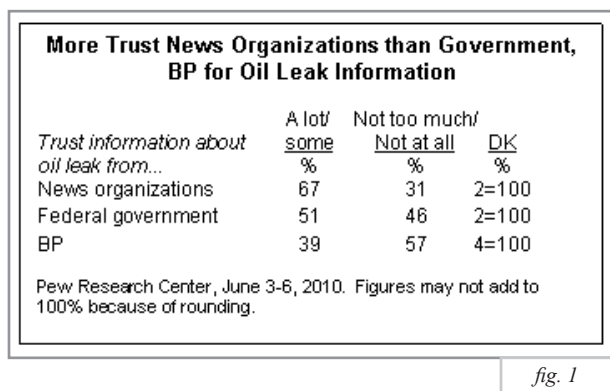
In a time when the news media compete against each other based primarily on immediacy and social media make even the fastest news outlets appear slow to respond, the task of getting information out in a timely manner in a response is more challenging than ever. Anyone involved in a complex response will likely tell stories of delays caused by bureaucracy and the need for approvals from multiple levels. While all events and exercises using the JIC have struggled with this critical issue, the directions for approval of information are very clear. The Assistant PIO for Information Products is to:

*“Route to PIO for approval all documents, photos, video and other materials (accurate information is essential in preventing public confusion, loss of credibility and/or adverse publicity).” The PIO, working with Command, sets the protocols by which Command maintains full authority over public information while minimizing delay with appropriate delegation of that authority.*

ESF #15’s release authority is not centered in Command but within the EA operation which, as we have noted, reports ultimately to the Secretary and the President. The SOP manual states:

*“Per Annex F to this SOP, and consistent with the decentralized organization and execution of external communications, routine release of information will be approved by the ESF #15 EA Officer or as delegated. Significant policy statements and potentially sensitive external materials should be coordinated with the FCO and JFO Coordination Group before release.”*

In theory the more decentralized plan of the ESF External Affairs operation should result in faster information approvals and in improvement in information flow. In reality, as was clearly seen in the Gulf Spill, the transition to ESF #15 accompanied an ever increasing role of the Department of Homeland Security personnel and White House Communications in reviewing and approving all information released. In early June the flipchart



in the communications operation still located in Robert, Louisiana and still referred to as the Joint Information Center, clearly spelled out the protocol for receiving White House approval on all releases including videos and images. This protocol was very specific in requiring a one hour delay in the release of any information after approval had been granted by the White House. By the time I arrived to observe the communication operations, three Department of Homeland Security personnel were located in the External Affairs operation and it quickly became clear that they fully controlled the strategy, information release and messaging issuing from the response. Their control was directly related to the fact that they had the direct connection to the White House staff assigned to monitor and approve information releases.

The quiet frustration expressed by many involved in response communication at this time was palpable. The social media operation, highly praised by experts early in the response when those manning that function were given considerable freedom and flexibility by Unified Command, was restricted to Facebook posts and occasional tweets announcing the release of the transcript of latest National Incident Commander press release or another in the series of releases titled “The On-Going Administration Response to the BP Oil Spill.” There was virtually no flexibility in responding to emerging issues as they became trending topics in the social media world. For example, those in the External Affairs operation and particularly those involved in social media interaction, were eager to address much social media comment and misinformation about the issue of turtles allegedly being burned in some cases of “in situ” burning of oil. BP had prepared a statement for release explaining the measures they had taken to prevent these accidents from happening. After much back and forth, the White House staff refused to allow any comment or interaction on this issue because of concern of heightening the issue in public awareness.

The now lengthy process of information approvals minimized the dexterity of particularly the External Affairs operation (the issue of the separation from the JIC will be considered next). Their ability to respond quickly to emerging stories was significantly compromised by a process that at best took hours, in some notable cases of video approvals, 48 hours.

### ***External Affairs, Liaison and Joint Information Center***

A review of the organization chart of the National Response Team’s JIC Model shows that all public and stakeholder communication functions are included in the Joint Information Center. However, in the ESF #15 organization chart, the JIC is one of six functional units of the External Affairs operation. In the NRT JIC model, the term JIC encompasses all public communication, while in the NCP ESF structure, the JIC refers to that part of external affairs that specifically and exclusively manages media engagement.

The ESF #15 structure provided some very important advantages for response managers, primarily in how it integrated the public communication functions with communication with elected officials, local communities, private response partners, tribal authorities, international governments and agencies and anyone else outside of the response organization. Most of the communication and coordination functions with people and groups other than the media and community are managed according to ICS under the Liaison function, one of the three Command staff positions. Many in public communication management have considered this element of ICS to be one of the most significant weakness. Particularly in an age of Internet communications, where much of the communication and coordination is conducted and managed online such as through PIER, the task of coordinating among multiple different stakeholders and groups is simplified by integrated communication and interaction with all those outside

the response. The Liaison function, in this view, is an artifact of a pre-Internet communication structure which focused Joint Information Center operations on media management.

Clearly, the planners responsible for creating ESF #15 saw the JIC as a media-only function and therefore limited its scope to media engagement. However, the updated version of the NRT JIC model incorporates a broader understanding of the JIC, addressing community relations and stakeholder engagement as well as modifying the definition of a JIC to incorporate virtual online operations.

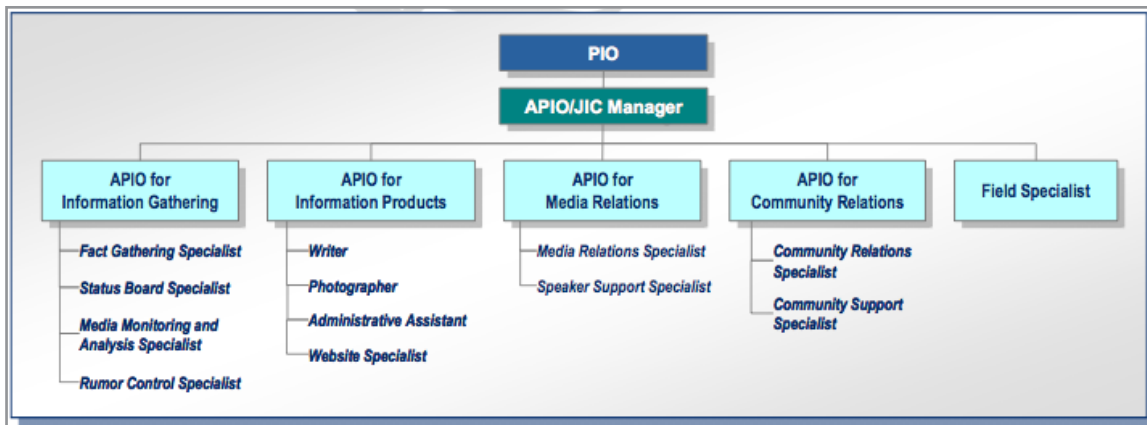
As stated earlier, the Deepwater Horizon response started as a traditional ICS Joint Information Center and transitioned to a modified ESF #15 model as the Department of Homeland Security and White House Communications took an increasingly direct role. The transition was solidified in the change of location of Unified Area Command and the communication operation from Robert, Louisiana to a downtown New Orleans location. Now the JIC and the External Affairs operation were not only separated on the organization chart but they became physically separated. The JIC was located on the 14<sup>th</sup> floor along with the operation center of Unified Command. The larger External Affairs operation was located on the 15<sup>th</sup> floor.

While a linkage remained, the two operated quite independently with the JIC responsible for managing media engagement and External Affairs doing the strategic planning and messaging, managing the incident website, social media and all stakeholder groups as identified in the structure. The JIC had a distinct advantage in accessing emerging response information and securing approval as this process was now separated from External Affairs. One staff member located in External Affairs said that it was routine for External Affairs to find out new information through media reports as JIC staff, upon receiving an inquiry, had contacted Unified Command operations directly, received the information, and relayed it to the media without informing External Affairs. This information, mediated as it was, would then be included in updates prepared for the incident website. This process, which worked to the advantage of the media, was due to the location of DHS staff in External Affairs, a floor above the JIC. They were there to assist with messaging and strategy and the decentralization of authority given to the JIC is consistent with that described in the ESF #15 SOP. Nevertheless, it was a significant frustration to the External Affairs staff, particularly those accustomed to a traditional NRT JIC operation where approved information would be simultaneously released to all audiences and published on the website concurrent with media release.

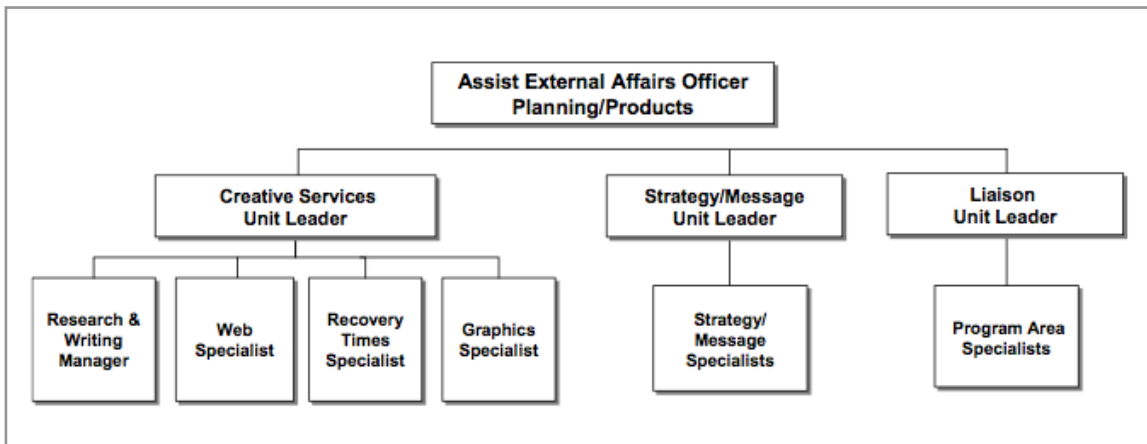
Similarly, those working as part of the Liaison function under the continuing ICS structure used in the operational response, had far greater freedom in conveying response information. These communicators were part of the very extensive community outreach efforts launched with exceptional speed by BP and buttressed by the arrival of approximately 120 FEMA representatives assigned to interact with affected communities. Because Liaison reports directly to Command, it does not use the same approval protocols as the PIO and JIC under the NRT JIC model and certainly not the same as the ESF #15 structure. Consequently, they had considerably greater freedom in communicating to citizens, community groups and local elected leaders with whom they interacted.

A major challenge of the communication leaders was the geographic spread of the response and the fact that media and public engagement took place over a multi-state area. With media engagement being conducted out of the JIC in Mobile, Alabama as well as from the Incident Command Posts in Houma, Louisiana and Pensacola, Florida, External Affairs created a media response protocol to give guidance to the dispersed team members.

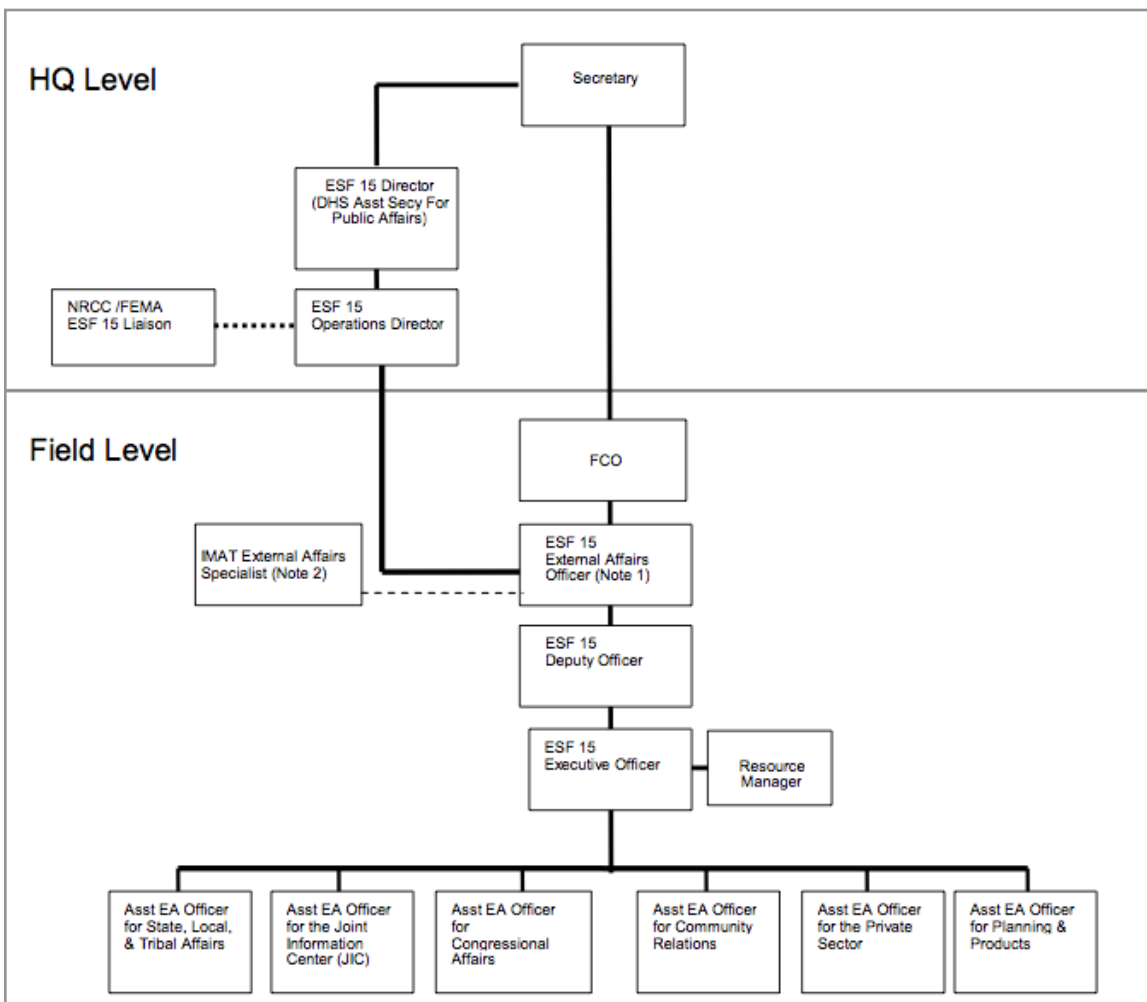
This provided clear direction for referring reporters based on the significance of the media outlet. In other words, engagement with the major national media was to be fully managed by the primary JIC in Robert, then in New Orleans. Local media could be assisted by any member of the JIC, providing of course, that the ground rules of information release were followed.



National Response Team  
JIC Model Organization  
Structure



ESF #15 Organization  
Structure



Organization of ESF #15  
Planning and Products Unit

## Conclusion: Major Lessons Learned

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The primary After Action Reports are still to be written by all the key players and as this is written the headlines are focusing on investigations rather than on-going response activities. While it is too early to draw definitive conclusions for an event that seems to never end, we'll focus on the following conclusions:

- A communication success story
  - Top-level familiarity and commitment necessary for plans to work
  - Nature of media and social media revealed
  - An uncertain future for the concept of a "single voice" in multi-agency response
  - Unnecessary erosion of public trust
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## ***A Communication Success Story***

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This judgment will no doubt come as a surprise to many and may draw strong argument. However, with all the coverage and public outcry about the event, one thing was notably missing—loud criticism of lack of communication. In fact, more careful analysis than is possible here may reveal that this is the first major disaster in which a primary learning will not be the need for improved communication. Disasters includes both internal communication and public communication—both of which are typically severely criticized by the media, the public and experts alike. This event is notable for the lack of focus on media access, transparency, timely information, and other typical complaints. To be sure, there were complaints and media stories about lack of access, typically as we have noted, by reporters attempting to find evidence of a BP conspiracy. Admiral Allen’s clear directive to provide “maximum access with minimum delay” was widely implemented with only scattered problems involving safety issues or third-party approvals.

It is also notable that no major environmental NGO emerged as a major voice in the response despite the nature of the event. As the Pew Research media analysis showed, one remarkable factor in the coverage was the lack of a protagonist, or leading “white hat” accuser to stand in opposition to the antagonists. This is unusual but may be attributed in part to the role that both the media and the administration played in insuring that BP remained the sole focus of public outrage. In this view, no other protagonist or “white hat” accuser was needed.

Much credit for the communication success must go to Admiral Allen who served as a commanding and authoritative presence, and who was both reasonable in his treatment of BP and accommodating to the political realities. Certainly as much or more credit goes to the members of the JIC and External Affairs operations who sacrificed their personal lives, often for weeks on end, to serve the public by giving their best to the operation. Although frequently disheartened and frustrated by the nature of much of the coverage as well as the increasing controls and restrictions, they continued to work exceedingly long hours to provide that unending flow of information so demanded by the world.

## ***Top-Level Familiarity and Commitment Necessary for Plans to Work***

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For those closely involved with oil spill drills, exercises and actual events over the past twenty years, a primary take-away will be the obvious lack of adherence to well-tested and proven plans and procedures. On September 9, in an interview with National Public Radio, Admiral Allen was asked what were the most important lessons learned from this event. His answer was the lack of consistency in how various levels of government responded to this event. Few in the media or public understood the importance of this comment because the deep issues caused by the loss of discipline and effectiveness due to lack of adherence to the Incident Command System were not readily evident to the public. Unfortunately, the media covering the event were not familiar enough with ICS, OPA 90 and twenty years of oil spill response history to ask the intelligent questions about this. But without question the biggest issue for those involved in the response, again referring primarily to the communications element, was the abandonment of well-proven and effective methods of managing an event of this magnitude.

While the operational response likely adhered more closely to the ICS methods than the communication operation, there were still considerable variances from ICS and existing plans. More than one BP operational responder commented on the frustration within BP regarding lack of adherence to established plans and procedures. This was attributed to the fact that lower level facility, operation and emergency managers were the ones involved in the training and drills. The senior executives were too busy to actively participate and would leave such details to their managers. However, when an event of this nature occurs the senior leaders arrive and, not having the familiarity and comfort level with the standard procedures, implement management structures similar to their existing business operations with which they are comfortable. One JIC leader very familiar with JIC operations who attempted to establish a traditional JIC organization structure in Mobile, was overruled by a senior BP executive who did not understand the structure and who proceeded to organize the ICS and JIC-trained responders into a British-style press operation. It was only after this executive left for another assignment was the leader allowed to establish a JIC structure that conformed to the training many had received. The effectiveness of the JIC was dramatically improved.

This same concern was expressed by BP personnel involved in the operational response. Senior leaders had no familiarity with ICS and when they arrived on scene would organize their team along standard business organization lines similar to their existing operations, contributing to confusion and raising all the command and communication issues that ICS was designed to address. But this was not limited to BP. On a broader scale the same happened when the administration took a firm hand in the response. It is almost certain that few if any senior officials have taken the ICS training offered by DHS and strongly encouraged for all response personnel. If there was familiarity with the processes, particularly in the communication function, then the changes that were implemented are more evidence of lack of commitment to basic NIMS principles and ICS operations. A modified and ad hoc communication organization system was implemented, loosely based on ESF #15 that provided the kind of direct management by DHS and the White House that was required by the authorities, but that was unfamiliar to many of the trained responders and inconsistent with their understanding of coordinated communication management. Consequently, there was sense of floundering without clear direction as to how to improve effectiveness other than to wait for directions from above.

Prominent political adviser and analyst David Gergen in a nationally published article called for a military-style national response system. He is only one of many prominent Washington insiders who, along with reporters and editors and the general public, are unaware of NIMS and ICS and its history of effective response management. Perhaps a better system exists and the lessons learned from this event will no doubt lead us to improved response methods. But until one is adopted nationally, we are much better off in the response community to help make certain that the system we have is fully embedded as our national response system. Progress made since the 1970s and since its adoption nationally in 2004 should not be squandered. That means that our top leaders need to understand and be committed to NIMS-ICS in order for it to work effectively. It also means that every company who may find themselves as a Responsible Party in a major event should make it a high priority to see that their CEO and all senior managers are trained on NIMS-ICS and its related communication structure, the NRT JIC model.

## *The Nature of Media and Social Media Revealed*

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The Pew Research study indicates the public was overall satisfied with the media coverage. This will no doubt come as a surprise to many if not most in the response. While there were many examples of outstanding reporting and highly professional and responsible coverage, there were also many examples of what must be considered gratuitous and irresponsible coverage. This can be attributed to the intensive competition within mainstream media. The event was extraordinarily long and the public interest, as we have seen, even exceeded the exceptional level of coverage. Everyday reporters, editors, producers and publishers had to confront the question of what they would offer that would scoop the competition, draw eyes onto their pages or screens, and generate the most buzz or discussion. This effort provided numerous examples of coverage that was more aimed at inflaming the public outrage than enlightening. As one Economist columnist stated, today's media is more interested in provocation than analysis. The lesson here is not for the media, who after all they do what they must to survive in a difficult environment. The lesson instead is for crisis communication and emergency response leaders. Speakers at a conference in Washington DC on crisis communication talked about forming a partnership with the media in emergency communications. That may be possible and advisable in some circumstances, providing that the necessary agenda of the media to attract and hold attention is fully understood.

For its part, social media use in emergency communication may be said to have come of age in this event. During the event the American Red Cross issued new research showing the increasing role that social media is playing in disaster communication. The issue is not so much what the response organization does in relation to social media, but what the millions of users of Facebook, Twitter, Wordpress, Blogger, YouTube and a myriad other social media channels do with the information and thoughts they have about an event such as this. Increasingly social media is used to share important information whether that comes from someone else observing it, from a news report, or from the response itself. Social media, like the Internet itself is a vast network, not unlike our brains, with information being shared across interconnected channels at the speed of light. It is very clear that crisis communication and emergency response will always have to address social media as a vital part of response communication at least until it is replaced by something even more sophisticated.

Social media impacts an event like this in many different ways. It frequently initiates media coverage and sets trends in media reporting but also expands and multiplies the influence of coverage. Social media and mainstream media are closely linked. Social media provides an important and valuable channel for communication between the response and the social media participants. And it reflects mood, sentiment and issue trends in a faster, more direct and more emotionally-charged way than can be observed through more traditional sentiment monitoring. In that regard, for responders it is frequently both painful and enlightening. One aspect of social media that is challenging to confront is the often extreme anger and animosity expressed. While not unique to this situation, as any observer of political, sports or religious debates on social media sites will attest, in a situation such as this the level of outrage seems to reach new heights. It is something all communicators need to be prepared to deal with. As one young woman assigned to respond to negative inquiries commented: "I am learning new ways to express myself everyday."

JIC leaders early on made the decision to engage in these often difficult conversations. Unified Command and BP security restricted responding to those who threatened physical harm or violence, but everyone else

received a personal reply. While no measurement has been attempted to evaluate the results, the continuous monitoring provided a helpful indication of the changing sentiment while the approach of “a soft answer turns away wrath” was almost certainly helpful in at least individual cases in helping those outside the response understand that there were real people doing their best inside the response.

### ***An uncertain future for the concept of a “single voice” in multi-agency response***

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Those involved in responses prior to Deepwater Horizon, particularly those using the ICS and Joint Information Center model, are no doubt wondering what happened to the concept of a single voice and what that means for the future. There was indeed a single voice in this response—initially that of Unified Command incorporating all its participants including BP. But that changed to the single voice being that of the administration and the office of Unified Command being used in the administration’s efforts to inoculate itself and direct the focus on BP. The question is, what will other Responsible Parties do in the future faced with a large event in which they are working alongside government agencies? Our recommendation following this is that they prepare to communicate both jointly and independently. Should the JIC be ‘federalized,’ not in actuality but in intention and perception as this was, they have little choice but to aggressively and independently communicate. That this may indeed be the new model going forward was given impetus by the Enbridge pipeline spill that occurred in July. The EPA as the lead agency, conducted its own independent communication separately from Enbridge and indeed, communicated that Unified Command consisted of all the government agencies participating but pointedly did not include the company. The company, for its part, managed its own communication and website apart from the EPA. The single voice was gone and there was no sign of a Joint Information Center.

While this applies to Responsible Parties under OPA 90, what about other government agencies? While perhaps less at risk of being “thrown under the bus” by the top jurisdiction agency, it certainly must be clear to all response leaders and all the elected officials overseeing those response agencies that when a higher level jurisdiction determines that to preserve the political standing of their elected officials a participating agency must serve as the focus of blame, they are all very much at risk. While this may not evolve, it would be understandable in major multi-agency responses following this event that there may be considerable wariness regarding how the politics will play out. Because of this, it may be expected that government agencies and jurisdictions will be less likely and eager to cooperate in joint communications in the future and more oriented toward independent communications. The future of a “single voice” for future responses is not beyond hope but certainly put in doubt based on this event.

### ***Unnecessary erosion of public trust***

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The goal of communicators for organizations and agencies is to build and maintain public trust. That’s what makes crisis communication the most challenging and difficult of communication situations because crisis events typically, by their nature, undermine trust. It is even more challenging when a company is involved in an industry with very low public trust and even more challenging when the problem is highly visible and, for reasons

difficult for the public to comprehend, is not resolved for weeks or months. All these factors and more contributed to the virtual impossibility of BP as the primary culprit in this disaster being able to build trust. The oil industry, of which the company is one of the largest and most visible international giants, is almost universally distrusted—only the media industry scores lower in most trust metrics. BP is a foreign-owned company, a fact that was strongly highlighted by the administration as they continually referred to it as “British Petroleum” despite that name being abandoned years ago. The company’s troubled safety history was repeated over and over in news stories, giving a context that only contributed to public fears. Worst of all, the company demonstrated that it was incapable of staunching the flow of millions of gallons of oil into the gulf, a gushing torrent painfully visible to the entire world.

If there is any question about the general perception of BP and its credibility during this event, it is highlighted by the Pew Research study which compared credibility between the news media, the federal government and BP. Clearly, and for reasons this study has explored, BP’s credibility was by far the worse with the news media showing considerably higher scores than either the government or BP.

Crisis communication pundits and even reporters have weighed in on BP’s reputation loss attributing it to BP’s faulty public relations, as we have noted earlier. The faults and failures have been adequately highlighted but we are left with the question that given this situation, could even a perfect public relations response have made any real difference?

It is hard to argue with the success of the Obama administration’s political management of the event. The media analysis showed that they became targeted early on as the magnitude of the event grew and voices were raised for a stronger government hand. It was unfortunate that the early strategy was to hide the government’s very strong presence in order to focus blame and attention on BP. Because when the strategy changed on May 27 to say “the federal government was in charge” it seemed to require a severe diminishment of BP’s visible role in the response and divorce from any official role in response communication. A case can be made that it worked because a number of analysts commented as the event began to wind down that Obama was largely inoculated from blame for the event and for the highly publicized failings of the response.

But could it have been different? A better way for both the administration and BP would have been to stick to the script. The script being the “single voice” concept of the Joint Information Center in which all critical response parties stood together and explained clearly and in factual terms what they were doing to stop the spill, protect the environment and take care of those impacted. Any concern about taxpayer involvement could have been clearly addressed both by explaining the law relating to spills and to demonstrate Congress and the administration’s resolve to protect the taxpayer from costs. Any accusations about response failure could have been directly and straightforwardly addressed as Admiral Allen proved over and over he was fully capable of doing. A model for this would be California Governor Schwarzenegger who, when challenged by the media on inadequate response to wildfires in Southern California, directly confronted the reporter and made it clear the reporter did not know what he was talking about. Incorrect information and overtly agenda-based reporting could have been addressed by a much more aggressive rumor management function which the JIC plan includes. President Obama and administration officials could have visited the response and commented positively on the incredible work being done, including that done by the outstanding team of experts assembled to address technical challenges more akin to Apollo 13 than a traditional oil spill.

This would not have prevented the kind of media coverage we witnessed, nor the incessant blame game being played, nor the anger and outrage so evidenced in the social media and the interaction, nor the eager politicians jumping in for political advantage. But it would have helped the nation understand that in events like this the only way to respond effectively is to collaborate and cooperate—in the case of an oil spill, even with the company who may have caused it but who also has the necessary technical skills and technologies to address the problem. The result would not only have been a higher level of trust in the government and all response partners but it would have helped the nation understand that the system in which we have invested billions of tax dollars, the National Incident Management System, works and works for all our benefit. Because this did not happen our ability to communicate effectively, and possibly our ability to work together to respond effectively, may have been compromised. Only future responses will tell if the decisions made in managing communications during the Deepwater Horizon event will result in consequences we all regret.